Recent structural insights into the function of copper nitrite reductases

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Copper nitrite reductases (CuNiRs) carry out the first committed step of the denitrification pathway of the global nitrogen cycle, the reduction of nitrate to nitrite, or nitrite (NO₂⁻) to dinitrogen (N₂), via nitric oxide (NO) and nitrous oxide (N₂O) intermediates. This pathway is critical in the return of fixed nitrogen to the atmosphere and in controlling the level of biologically available nitrogen in the soil. The extensive use of nitrogen containing fertilisers from the Haber–Bosch process can cause major environmental problems if the denitrification pathway becomes overloaded. Moreover, the N₂O intermediate in the denitrification pathway is a potent greenhouse gas. The roles of different metalloenzymes in denitrification and their environmental and agricultural impacts have been recently reviewed.

The first committed step (i.e. the first effectively irreversible reaction in the pathway that commits the organism to generate the final product) in denitrification is the reduction of nitrate to NO (eqn (1)) and this is carried out either by Fe-containing cytochrome cd₁ nitrite reductases, penta- or octa-haem nitrite reductases or by CuNiRs, encoded by the nirk gene.

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\text{NO}_2^- + e^- + 2H^+ \rightarrow \text{NO} + \text{H}_2\text{O} \quad (1)
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Many detailed biochemical, spectroscopic, kinetic and structural studies have investigated the catalytic mechanisms of the CuNiRs and we describe only the key points in this review, focusing on structural insights. We describe the three-dimensional structures of CuNiRs and how these have led to profound insights into enzyme function and catalytic mechanism. We particularly focus on developments in the last decade including the discovery of extended CuNiRs, the application of serial femtosecond crystallography (SFX) and approaches to characterise the enzyme mechanism within protein crystals.

Overall fold and oligomeric state of CuNiRs

The majority of CuNiRs are trimeric, with each ~37 kDa monomer comprising two cupredoxin (β-sandwich) domains, Fig. 1A and B. Each of these domains has a similar architecture to that of monomeric cupredoxin proteins, such as azurin, pseudoazurin and rusticyanin, that act as electron donor partner proteins to CuNiRs. The C-terminal region of each cupredoxin-like monomer forms an extended loop that wraps around an adjacent monomer contributing to the stability of the trimer.

These well-characterised two-domain CuNiRs are assigned as classes I and II, depending on the colour arising from their type 1 Cu (T₁Cu) centre, with class I being blue and class II being green. Class III has an additional T₁Cu domain with a hexameric oligomer and is greenish-blue due to the presence of two Cu centres, one each of class I and II. This class III CuNiR is an example of a recently discovered group of extended (three-domain) CuNiRs, that exist with additional fused N- or C-terminal domains containing a T₁Cu or cytochrome haem redox centre, respectively (Fig. 1). Regardless of such variations, the core structure of T₁Cu and type 2 Cu (T₂Cu) sites in the trimeric core is largely conserved. We will first discuss the structure and function of the trimeric CuNiRs before highlighting variations in the more recently characterised extended CuNiRs.

The copper centres of CuNiRs in the resting state

All CuNiRs characterised to date contain an electron-providing T₁Cu centre and a catalytic T₂Cu centre. At the T₁Cu site, the Cu is coordinated by two His, one Cys and an axial Met forming a tetrahedral geometry, Fig. 2. The structural changes within

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**Metallomics**

**CRITICAL REVIEW**

Cite this: Metallomics, 2017, 9, 1470

Received 5th May 2017, Accepted 27th June 2017

DOI: 10.1039/c7mt00146k

rsc.li/metallomics

1470 | Metallomics, 2017, 9, 1470–1482 This journal is© The Royal Society of Chemistry 2017

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T1Cu sites between the Cu(II) and Cu(I) states are small (consistent with an entactic/rack state), and close to the level of precision at the typical resolutions of crystal structures.

Atomic resolution structures provide more accuracy for bond length parameters but usually at the expense of higher X-ray dose which can readily reduce the T1Cu to the Cu(I) state. EXAFS studies suggest an increase in the Cu–Cys bond length on reduction of the blue copper protein azurin of some 0.07 Å.¹¹ As the main chromophore of CuNiR, the T1Cu site is responsible for the colour of the protein in the cupric state. In general, T1Cu sites in copper proteins can vary widely in colour, including blue, green, red and purple.¹²,¹³ The relationship between T1Cu colour and geometry has been systematically studied. CuNiRs from different species appear blue, green or ‘bluish-green’ despite possessing an identical set of ligand residues. Insights into the relationship between T1Cu structure, colour and redox potential have been obtained by comparison of structures of blue and green CuNiRs and by mutagenesis of first and second coordination shell residues. Blue CuNiRs typically exhibit a long/weak Cu–Met bond (2.9 Å) while in green CuNiRs this bond is much shorter.

Work from Solomon and co-workers revealed that in green CuNiRs, two spectral forms were present, with the ratio between these being strongly temperature dependent.¹⁴ At low temperatures, a green form with a strong Met–Cu interaction is dominant, while at higher temperatures, a blue form becomes more populated, with a weaker Cu–Met interaction. The T1Cu geometry, colour and redox potential are profoundly affected by mutation of ligand residues with consequent effects on enzyme activity.

The catalytic T2Cu is separated from the T1Cu by ~12.6 Å and the centres are connected by a Cys–His bridge (for rapid
electron transfer) comprised of the T1Cu ligand Cys and a T2Cu ligating His. The T2Cu has (His)₃–H₂O ligation in the resting state with a tetrahedral geometry, Fig. 2 and 3A. One of the three His ligands is provided from an adjacent monomer of the CuNiR trimer. Upon reduction (in the absence of substrate), the T2Cu loses the coordinated H₂O resulting in Cu–(His)₃ ligation. The T2Cu centre possesses only a weak UV-visible absorption spectrum that is obscured by the much stronger absorbance of the T1Cu centre. The T2Cu ligand binding pocket contains several conserved residues with proposed functional roles related to substrate access, specificity, activity, electron transfer & proton transfer. The Cu-coordinated water molecule is H-bonded to an aspartic acid residue (AspCAT) and, via a water bridge, to a conserved His (HisCAT). AspCAT has been proposed to play roles in substrate guidance/stabilisation and to act as a proton donor, while HisCAT acts as a second proton donor. Crystal structures show that AspCAT can adopt two different conformations, named ‘gatekeeper’ – pointed away from T2Cu and ‘proximal’ – oriented towards T2Cu and H-bonding to the bound water molecule in the resting state. Mutation of AspCAT to asparagine (Asn) in CuNiR eliminated catalytic activity providing strong evidence for its role in proton transfer. The properties of AspCAT and HisCAT may provide the rationale for the observed pH dependence of CuNiR activity. Solomon and coworkers have reported a pKₐ of 6.4 for AspCAT (in AxNiR) when NO₂⁻ is bound. Finally, an isoleucine (IleCAT) residue that lies above the T2Cu binding site has been shown by structural studies to profoundly influence substrate orientation and consequently the catalytic activity.

Enzymatic mechanism of nitrite reduction: structural insights

The consensus mechanism for two domain CuNiRs begins with the resting state enzyme, with a water bound to the T2Cu centre, Fig. 3A. On the basis of X-ray crystallography and EXAFS studies on native and site-selected AxNiR mutants, supported by kinetics measurements, a catalytic mechanism was initially proposed in which NO₂⁻ coordinates to the T2Cu(II), displacing the water molecule in the native enzyme, Fig. 3B. In the absence of nitrite at the T2Cu there is a limited potential for electron transfer (ET) from the T1Cu, but following nitrite binding ET from T1Cu(II) to the T2Cu site occurs, which reduces the T2Cu. Two protons required for the catalytic reaction are thought to be provided by residues His254 (HisCAT) and Asp97 (AspCAT) and the proton-coupled electron-transfer (PCET) from T1Cu to T2Cu, involving the HisCAT and AspCAT residues, is thought to be the rate-determining step. In this PCET process, the two protons are provided to the bound NO₂⁻ along with an ET from the reduced T2Cu, to yield the NO product, Fig. 3C. This product then dissociates from the T2Cu, allowing water to rebind to reform the oxidised resting T2Cu state, Fig. 3A. Structural and kinetic studies on a number of other CuNiRs gave apparently conflicting evidence on whether the intramolecular ET occurred before or after NO₂⁻ binding [e.g. ref. 15, 26 and 27]. These conflicts have been mostly reconciled by a kinetic scheme for catalytic turnover in which two alternative mechanistic pathways are possible, varying in the sequence of ET and binding of nitrite, depending on the pH and nitrite concentration. The catalytic mechanism at the T2Cu site of CuNiRs has also been extensively explored using theoretical methods based on the crystal structures, though as yet no clear consensus has been reached on the precise nature and order of the proposed PCET reaction.

Key features relevant to this mechanism that are informed by structures include the modes of substrate and product binding, the likely electron and proton transfer pathways and steps and the conserved water structure within the active site pocket.

Substrate binding to the T2Cu centre and specificity

The first structure of a nitrite-bound CuNiR complex adduct was determined in 1991. Since then, structures have been determined of NO₂⁻ and NO-bound complexes at a variety of resolutions and pH of native and mutant CuNiRs from different organisms. Nitrite has typically been observed
to bind either in an asymmetric bidentate binding geometry with its O1 and O2 atoms ligating to T2Cu(n) or in a ‘side-on’ geometry with similar distances from T2Cu to the three atoms of nitrite. One of the highest resolution structures of a CuNiR–nitrite complex is that of AcNiR, to 1.10 Å resolution, where nitrite was observed with bidentate binding to T2Cu and dual conformations of Asp98CAT were present, with the proposal that the gatekeeper conformation of Asp98 (AspCAT) may be important for guiding NO2– to its binding site at the T2Cu. The proximal conformation, on the contrary, is significant for proton transfer, bond-cleavage and formation and release of the product, NO. The resting state has water bound to oxidised T2Cu and forms a H-bond to the negatively charged AspCAT residue. Nitrite is observed to bind to the T2Cu ion via a O-coordinate bidentate mode, displacing the bound water molecule and forming H-bonds between the O52 atom of AspCAT and the O2 atom of nitrite. Proton transfer occurs from the AspCAT to the nitrite to form the intermediate T2Cu-NOOH on reduction of the T2Cu site. His255 (HisCAT) facilitates bond cleavage of the N–ON bond to form the product, NO, by supplying the second proton in the widely-accepted mechanism. The NO product dissociates and leaves the resting water-bound oxidised T2Cu ion. Structures have been determined of ascorbate-reduced and reduced nitrite-soaked AfNiR at 2.0 Å [PDB 1AQ8] and 1.85 Å [PDB 1AS8] resolutions, respectively, with nitrite bound to reduced T2Cu, revealing few structural changes relative to the oxidised form.31

In the different structures of nitrite complexes, bidentate nitrite has been modelled in both ‘top-hat’ and ‘side-on’ positions. XFEL SFX54 data have revealed that the ‘top-hat’ mode is the binding geometry initially present in the T2Cu(n) form of the enzyme and that the side-on may be the result of T2Cu reduction. This highlights that great care must be taken in crystallographic studies of nitrite-bound CuNiRs due to the propensity for X-ray generated photoelectrons to initiate catalysis within the crystal, leading to the conversion of substrate to NO at the T2Cu site. Structures determined from CuNiR nitrite complexes using high X-ray doses in many cases reveal a significant population of the T2Cu site mutations in AfnNiR significantly altered the binding mode of nitrite34 and these were related to changes in enzyme activity. Mutation of this IleCAT to Val or Leu led to asymmetric bidentate NO2– binding while mutation to Met, Thr, Gly or Ala resulted in monodentate coordination, allowing a water molecule to also bind to T2Cu in a position close to that usually occupied by the O2 atom of nitrite. Monodentate nitrite binding was associated with greatly reduced catalytic activity, pointing to a key role for IleCAT in promoting a nitrite binding geometry conducive during catalysis. Crystal structures were determined of the oxidised and chemically-reduced AspCAT to Asn mutant in AfNiR.35 In these structures, nitrite was bound in a side-on manner with an increased level of disorder, ascribed to a shift of Asn relative to Asp producing an unfavourable geometry for H-bonding with the bound protonated nitrite. However, this disorder could simply represent a mixture of top-hat and side-on nitrite molecules within the crystal. The HisCAT to Asn mutant of AfNiR showed no displacement of the water molecule and the nitrite is bound to the T2Cu in a monodentate manner via an O atom. Nitrite is oriented away from Ile257 and towards an Ala residue and the pocket H-bonding network is drastically altered in the H255N mutant, indicating an essential role for nitrite binding and function.35

A somewhat different binding mode for nitrite was observed in a structure of the C135A mutant (which eliminates T1Cu binding) of the thermophile GtNiR, a close homologue of GtNiR. The 1.90 Å structure showed nitrite bound in a monodentate manner via its O2 atom with this atom being positioned to form a H-bond to AspCAT. HisCAT adopted a rotated conformation due to the formation of a H-bond to a Gln residue rather than the Thr which interacts with HisCAT in other CuNiRs. Interestingly, in this enzyme, the gatekeeper conformation of AspCAT and the ‘vertical’ conformer of HisCAT are sterically restricted by the unusual position of a Phe residue near to the catalytic pocket which provides additional rigidity to the active site in this enzyme from a thermophile, Fig. 4A. Intriguingly, when the structure of the nitrite complex of GtNiR was determined at 320 K, the observed substrate binding mode was side-on, similar to that observed in other CuNiRs, a result ascribed to increased dynamic flexibility of the pocket at the higher temperature.

**Substrate and copper access to the T2Cu site**

The T2Cu site, as mentioned previously, makes up the active substrate-binding site and is coordinated by three His and one H2O/OH– ligand.18 In the resting state nitrite has access to the T2Cu centre via a channel some ~12 Å deep from the protein surface and displaces the H2O ligand to initiate catalysis. Intriguingly, mutation of the surface-exposed Phe306 to a Cys
Native CuNiR can bind small molecules including acetate, nitrate, formate, azide and N₂O, of which complex structures have all been determined crystallographically. The binding mode of such ligands is strongly influenced by the pocket residues IleCAT and AspCAT and these, together with the dimensions of the substrate access channel, act to prevent the binding of larger ligands. Monatomic species such as chloride have also been shown to bind to T2Cu.

A recent study of GtNiR at 1.20 Å resolution revealed electron density consistent with the interpretation that an oxygen ligand was bound at the T2Cu site, in the absence of nitrite or NO. CuNiRs have the ability to catalyse the two-electron reduction of O₂ to hydrogen peroxide (H₂O₂) but no structural data for this molecular oxygen ligand has previously been observed. In the GtNiR structure, the O₂ ligand was modelled in a side-on manner with one short (2.1 Å) and one longer (2.4 Å) Cu–O bond length. Oxygen forms H-bonds with AspCAT and a water molecule and also makes van der Waals contacts with ValCAT. This latter hydrophobic interaction appears to be related to the side on binding mode as previously proposed for NO binding. Oxygen binding has not been observed in other CuNiRs and was proposed to be observable in GtNiR due to the presence of a Val residue in place of IleCAT, which creates an unusually open substrate binding pocket and/or the slower O₂-reduction rate in the CuNiR from this species. Interestingly, the structure of a CuNiR from *Nitrosomonas europaea* revealed a much more restricted substrate channel than in other CuNiRs, proposed to be the basis of the unusual O₂ tolerance of this enzyme enabling it to function in an aerobic environment. In addition, a second water channel was observed and assigned as a water exit channel in this enzyme.

It is a notable feature of CuNiRs that they possess a significant superoxide dismutase activity, for example AzNiR at a remarkable ~56% activity compared to bovine Cu, Zn superoxide dismutase (CuZnSOD), one of the most efficient enzymes known. The structural similarity between the Cu(i) form of the T2Cu site and that of CuZnSOD has been noted from both EXAFS and crystallographic data. Interestingly, CuZnSOD does not display NiR activity.

**Identification of intramolecular electron and proton transfer pathways**

The CuNiR enzyme reaction requires that one electron and two protons are supplied to the catalytic T2Cu centre and it has been demonstrated that this occurs in a coupled (PCET) manner. Spectroscopic and mutational studies showed that electrons are transferred from physiological redox partner proteins such as azurin, pseudoazurin or cytochrome c₅₅₃ to reduce the T1Cu centre. Intramolecular ET occurs between the Cu sites to deliver the electron to the T2Cu centre, in the process reoxidising the T1Cu. The pathway for intramolecular ET was identified as a Cys–His bridge between ligating residues of the two Cu centres, providing a facile through-bond pathway.

T1Cu site mutations have been characterised revealing effects upon enzyme colour, redox potential and ET. A M150E mutation in AfNiR resulted in a protein binding Zn to the T1Cu site with a 1000-fold loss of activity, while a C130A mutation in AzNiR led to a vacant T1Cu site and abolition of activity.

Analysis of high resolution crystal structures led to proposals for proton channels connecting the protein surface (and bulk solvent) with the T2Cu site. A ‘primary’ proton channel in AzNiR linked the T2Cu site residue AspCAT with the surface via a well-ordered network of water molecules. A ‘secondary’ channel was later identified in a structure at high pH where residues Asn90, Asn107 and Ala131 together with water molecules also provide a H-bonding network to the surface. Supporting evidence was provided from activity and structural work on mutated enzymes. For example, a H254F mutation abolished the ‘primary’ channel yet retained near-native levels of activity. In contrast the N90S variant targeting the secondary channel lowered activity by 70%. These data led to the proposal that this secondary channel was in fact the most important route for protons. Similarly, the ET pathway has been investigated by structural and related studies on mutants. As well as the C130A AzNiR mutation described above, a H129V mutation in AzNiR resulted in an unprecedented bis-His T2Cu binding site while disrupting the Cys–His bridge leading to a complete loss of enzyme activity.

**The structure of the T2Cu-NO species**

All crystal structures of CuNiR–NO complexes have revealed a side-on binding mode to T2Cu. Structures have been determined of NO complexes by several approaches: (i) NO-soaking into AfNiR crystals; (ii) endogenously present NO, in crystals grown from protein isolated from *Achromobacter cycloclastes* cells grown under denitrifying conditions and (iii) produced from nitrite in situ by X-ray driven catalysis using ‘multiple-structure one crystal’ (MSOX) serial crystallography. The structures determined by each method consistently show side-on binding with near-equlidistant bond lengths to Cu for the N and O atoms and reveal that bound NO interacts with active site residues. Several issues regarding the NO complex remain challenging to address from the electron density alone. The electron density for the N and O atoms is very similar and structures have been determined with different assignments of the density peaks modelled. Consideration of bonding further suggests that the NO molecule interacts with AspCAT which adopts its ‘proximal’ position in the product complex. Similarly, crystal structures are not yet able to give a definitive answer to the identification of the side-on NO complex as Cu(i)–NO⁺ or Cu(n)–NO⁻.
An outstanding mystery is the suggestion that solution spectroscopic data supports an end-on mode of NO binding [Cu–N–O] rather than side-binding. In particular, ENDOR data of native and the 1289V and 1257A mutants of RsNiR suggests a Cu–N–O angle of 160° in native RrsNiR with magnetic interaction of O with the C31 atom of Ile257. Simulations of the complex show 3–10 kcal mol⁻¹ energetic preference for the end-on form. A subsequent EPR study of model compound analogues found a clear dependence of g upon the Cu–N–O angle. Taken together with the previous EPR data of RsNiR, this work suggested that a strongly bent (~136°) Cu–N–O binding geometry is feasible in CuNiRs. One proposal from computational simulation was that Ile257 dictates the side-on binding mode observed in structures with the proposal that a small structural change when the protein is in solution would allow the end-on binding mode to be sterically feasible.

**Surface properties and intermolecular electron transfer**

The electrostatic surfaces of CuNiRs are variable, with distinct differences between the blue and green classes of 2 domain enzymes. This, together with comparable analysis of the electrostatic surfaces of the partner proteins provides a rationale for the observed specificity of CuNiRs from different species for their cognate electron donors. Azurins reacted rapidly with blue CuNiRs but slowly with green CuNiRs. In contrast, pseudoazurin reacted effectively with either colour of CuNiR. Notably, CuNiR–Cyt complexes are more stable than the pseudoazurin partner. The solvent-exposed His81 Cu-ligand of the pseudoazurin lies ~2.6 Å from the Ala86 oxygen atom of AxNiR, an arrangement that would allow through-space ET between the proteins.

**3-Domain fused CuNiRs**

A recent development has been the discovery of CuNiRs containing additional domains. The first example was the structure of the hexameric CuNiR from Hyphomicrobium denitrificans (HdNiR), determined at 2.2 Å resolution. Fig. 1. DNiR has high sequence homology to AniA, while the structure revealed a novel additional N-terminal cupredoxin domain, containing an additional T1Cu(T1CuN) centre. The extended enzyme forms a 340 kDa hexameric prism-shaped oligomer. Interestingly, the additional T1CuN cupredoxin domain has low sequence homology to the other cupredoxin domains of HdNiR but high homology with those of AxNiR. The separation of the T1CuN centres is 14 Å in a head to head arrangement, suggesting that ET proceeds by initial reduction of T1CuN by Cyt₃₅₀ followed by ET between T1CuN and T1CuC, Fig. 6A. The additional cupredoxin domain in HdNiR may not be involved in the catalytic mechanism due to the large distance separating it from the T2Cu centre where catalysis occurs. Subsequent bioinformatics analysis led to the identification of other N- and C-terminal 3-domain CuNiRs. The C-terminally-extended enzymes possess an additional haem-cytochrome domain. A crystal structure of a C-terminally extended CuNiR from Pseudoalteromonas haloplanktis (PhNiR) was deposited in the Protein Data Bank in 2008 (PDB 2ZOO) but remains unpublished. The first detailed and published structural analysis of a C-terminally extended CuNiR, came from the atomic resolution (1.01 Å) structure of the 499 residue CuNiR from Ralstonia picketti (RpNiR) by Hasnain and co-workers. The 1.01 Å resolution structure of RpNiR revealed a domain binding motif that positioned the T1Cu and Fe atoms only 10.6 Å apart, notably...
closer than the separation of centres in the AxNiR–Cyt,c551 complex, Fig. 5 and 6. A series of water molecules were present between the cytochrome domain and the surface above the T1Cu site, suggesting a role in electronic coupling across the interface. This hypothesis was tested by structural and functional analysis of site-directed mutants which confirmed the roles of Met92 and Pro93 in interface ET. As well as the differences in domain structure, notable differences are apparent between RpNiR and the 2-domain NiRs in the vicinity of the catalytic T2Cu centre. In contrast to 2-domain NiRs where the T2Cu-bound water is H-bonded to Asp CAT and His CAT,i n RpNiR this water instead forms an H-bond to Asp CAT and a second water molecule. In PhNiR, the water is only H-bonded to Asp CAT.

Notably, in the substrate binding channel of RpNiR, a Tyr residue acts to ‘plug’ the substrate binding channel, excluding water molecules. The atomic resolution structure of RpNiR provided clear evidence for the observed preference for nitrite binding to reduced T2Cu in this enzyme, rather than the preferred oxidised state in 2-domain CuNiRs.

Membrane associated CuNiRs

The crystal structure of the soluble domain of the outer membrane AniA protein from Neisseria gonorrhoeae was determined in 2002. The AniA protein has around half the specific activity of AfNiR, is essential for growth in low-oxygen conditions with nitrite present and protects against human-sera killing of the pathogen. The soluble domain has a similar fold to the typical CuNiRs but has two shortened loops, with one loop possibly related to interactions with a membrane anchored azurin electron donor and the other likely to interact with the membrane itself. The Cu centres in AniA are similar to those of 2-domain CuNiRs, but with a visible colour intermediate between that of green and blue sites. While bioinformatics identified related proteins to AniA across a range of species, further structures have not yet been forthcoming.

Variations on the classical CuNiR structure and further classification of CuNiRs

In the vicinity of the metal centres, CuNiRs have been divided into classes based on the length of the two loops, the linker loop between the cupredoxin domains forming a monomer and the ‘tower loop’ adjacent to the T1Cu site. The majority of structures are of class I enzymes, while class II includes AniA. Some recently discovered CuNiRs fall between these two classes with intermediate length loops, e.g. GkNiR. Several CuNiRs from thermophilic bacteria have been structurally characterised. The structure of Geobacillus kaustophilus HTA426 CuNiR (GkNiR)
revealed a novel 28 residue additional α-helical region close to the N-terminus (residues 41–68). Other notable features of GkNiR include the presence of a Val residue in place of Ile CAT and differences in the hydrogen bonding network around the T2Cu centre.

Much of the structural data presented above has come from single, static crystal structures. Recent developments in X-ray sources, rapid detectors and data handling have allowed the determination of both ‘damage free’ single structures from large numbers of microcrystals and also multiple (potentially hundreds of) sequential datasets from just one protein crystal, making it possible to follow reactions in crystallo. Both approaches promise for determining structures of relevant catalytic intermediates.

**Insights from multiple-structures one crystal (MSOX) serial crystallography**

Multiple Structures from One Crystal (MSOX) is a data collection technique which uses solvated electrons generated during X-ray diffraction experiments to drive reactions requiring electron transfer. By taking sequential diffraction datasets over the same volume of one crystal it is possible to observe a reaction, occurring through a series of high resolution crystal structures with progressively increasing X-ray dose, Fig. 7. For NiRs, this approach was used to obtain 3 (low, medium and high-dose) datasets from tobacco assimilatory NiR, a Fe–S cluster and sirohaem containing protein that converts nitrite to ammonium. A series of this sort for a CuNiR, comprising 45 consecutive datasets collected in 19 s each for AcNiR, between 1.07 Å and 1.62 Å resolutions, clearly showed conversion of bound NO$_2^–$, to side-on NO within the crystal. At the end of the 45 structure series, a Cu(s) species with bound water is observed after loss of the NO ligand. Crystal structures are not yet able to give a definitive answer to the identification of the observed side-on NO complex as Cu(I)–NO or Cu(II)–NO.

Little to no change to the overall fold of the enzyme or in the vicinity of the T1Cu site were seen throughout the MSOX series. The low dose atomic resolution starting structure exhibited a previously unseen dual conformation of NO$_2^–$, in “top-hat” and “side-on” bidentate orientations, of which the top-hat conformation matches the vertical substrate coordination from radiation-damage-free XFEL structures, corroborating the idea that this vertical binding mode represents the initial nitrite binding position. Overall, the 45-dataset MSOX series demonstrated several structural changes at the T2Cu site, Fig. 7. Starting with the dual conformation nitrite and both gatekeeper and proximal Asp$_{\text{CAT}}$ conformations, by dataset four the series showed nitrite adopting a single side-on conformation and increasing proximal Asp$_{\text{CAT}}$ occupancy, lending credence to the operation of the sensor loop in response to...
the copper oxidation states during catalysis. By dataset eleven a second previously unseen conformation was observed, with either NO$_3^-$, NO or a H$_2$O molecule at the T2Cu, indicative of catalytic turnover in the crystal. The changes in gatekeeper and proximal positions of Asp$_{CAT}$ provide some structural evidence for the role of Asp$_{CAT}$ in substrate delivery and product release.

**XFEL structures of intact redox states of CuNiRs by serial femtosecond crystallography**

Reduction of metalloproteins by X-ray generated solvated electrons has been well-characterised, presents a major challenge for structural biology of such proteins, and has been demonstrated to occur in CuNiRs. Various online spectroscopic techniques have been developed to monitor the redox state of metals in crystals. Strategies to mitigate such reduction include merging of composite, low dose partial datasets or helical data collection approaches. Use of rapid X-ray detectors and cryogenic temperatures – typically 100 K – minimises but does not eliminate the effects of photoreduction or radiation damage to crystals. However, intact fully-oxidised structures may require the use of femtosecond X-ray pulses that can only be provided with sufficient brilliance by an X-ray free electron laser (XFEL). The first CuNiR XFEL structures at room temperature were recently obtained using the Spring-8 Compact Free Electron Laser (SACLA).

Comparison of the 1.43 Å resolution serial femtosecond crystallography (SFX) structure of resting state GtNiR with conventional synchrotron radiation (SRX) structures revealed a 10° rotation of the imidazole ring of His$_{CAT}$, in the SRX data in relation to the SFX structure. This led to the suggestion that His$_{CAT}$ may function as a proton-relay switch, whereby T2Cu reduction causes His$_{CAT}$ rotation thus altering the H-bonding network of His$_{CAT}$ with Thr268 and Glu267 to destabilise the positive charge of His$_{CAT}$ and facilitate proton transfer to the bridging water.

Subsequently, SFX structures were determined of *Alcaligenes faecalis* NiR (AfNiR) in its resting and nitrite bound (PDB 5D4I) states at 2.03 Å and 1.66 Å resolutions, respectively. The SFX structure of intact nitrite bound AfNiR revealed a single, vertical ‘top-hat’ binding mode of NO$_3^-$ compared to the side on conformation typically observed in SRX structures, suggesting the conformational change to side on NO$_3^-$ results from photo-reduction of the metal centres. AfNiR, as in GtNiR, shows a conformational change in His$_{CAT}$ structure in photoreduced SFX structures compared to oxidised SFX structures. However, unlike GtNiR where His$_{CAT}$ rotates 10° pivoting on N$_{O_2}$ and C$_{His}$ with a 0.3 Å shift in C$_{β}$, in AfNiR, His$_{CAT}$ rotates 20° about C$_{β}$ with no change in C$_{β}$, switching the H-bonding partner of His$_{CAT}$ N$_{O_2}$ from the Glu279 carbonyl to the hydroxyl of Thr280 which is both a longer

**Second proton can be delivered to form NO in either end-on or side-on binding modes.** However, the recently published MSOX series showing X-ray induced ligand turnover from NO$_3^-$ to side-on NO to water shows no change in the H-bond distances between His$_{CAT}$ and Glu279 (2.7 Å) between low and high X-ray doses and a gradual increase in the bond length between His$_{CAT}$ and Thr280 with increasing dose (2.8 Å at 0.69 MGy and 3.1 Å at 27.60 MGy).

**Outlook and remaining questions**

Several exciting new discoveries of CuNiR enzymes together with methodological developments have taken place in recent years. The advent of rapid mixing technologies at XFEL sources may allow time-resolved structural analysis of the CuNiR reaction with damage-free structures for reaction intermediates. The ever-increasing number of sequenced genomes promises the discovery of new variations of CuNiRs with differing domain structures. However, several outstanding questions remain that structural analysis will play a key role in addressing. For example, the protonation states of the important ‘catalytic residues’ have yet to be unequivocally determined for all stages of the reaction mechanism. Neutron diffraction – another way to obtain room temperature radiation-damage free structures – may help provide this information in the future and its potential for studying CuNiRs, in combination with high resolution X-ray structures, has already been shown. Establishing the precise chemical nature of the side-on NO intermediate also remains challenging as do the routes of substrate access and product escape. While significant insights have been gained from the current structures of protein-protein electron transfer complexes, improved structural resolution is required to clarify details of the emerging picture. The dynamic behaviour of CuNiRs is clearly of vital importance and can be addressed by combining structural data, measured at different temperatures, with molecular dynamics and QM/MM simulations.

**Acknowledgements**

The work was supported by BBSRC grant awards BB/M020924/1 to RWS, BB/M022714/1 to MH and by Leverhulme Trust grant
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Critical Review

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