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**Crystallographic analyses of  
apo and reduced azurins**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Chemistry at  
Massey University.

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## Abstract

Crystals of the blue copper protein azurin, from *Alc. denitrificans*, have been prepared in the apo (metal-free) and reduced (Cu(I)) forms by soaking oxidised (Cu(II)) azurin crystals in solutions containing cyanide and ascorbic acid, respectively. The apo and reduced azurin crystals are isomorphous with the oxidised crystals, containing two protein molecules in the asymmetric unit. A CAD4 diffractometer was used to collect X-ray diffraction data from these crystals, to 2.2Å resolution for apo-azurin and 1.9Å for reduced azurin. Both crystal structures have been refined using restrained least-squares methods, treating the two protein molecules of the asymmetric unit independently, to give final R-factors of 0.158 for apo-azurin (1956 protein atoms and 275 solvent atoms) and 0.166 for reduced azurin (1967 protein atoms and 269 solvent atoms).

Analysis and comparison of these structures with that of the oxidised form show that the protein structure is essentially identical between all three forms. However, very small changes, which are consistent between the two independent molecules of the asymmetric unit, are apparent at and near the copper binding site. Upon reduction of the oxidised form, all copper distances (left unrestrained during refinement) increase by 0.05-0.10Å, while the geometry remains unchanged. Thus the copper in reduced azurin is bound strongly by one thiolate sulphur (Cys-112) and two imidazole nitrogens (His-46 and His-117) in a trigonal arrangement, while a thioether sulphur (Met-121) and a carbonyl oxygen (Gly-45) approach the copper from axial directions to complete a distorted trigonal bipyramidal geometry. The Cu...S<sub>δ</sub> 121 distance is 3.2Å, and does not agree with the 2.7Å distance predicted by EXAFS studies despite attempts to restrain this distance during refinement. Two S...HN hydrogen bonds, between the cysteine sulphur and peptide NH groups, are shortened by ≈0.2Å upon reduction of Cu(II) to Cu(I).

The configuration of the copper ligands and the surrounding structure are maintained when the copper is removed. This shows that the folding of the polypeptide chain determines the conformation of the metal ligands, enforcing a distorted geometry on the copper centre in both oxidised and reduced forms. The structure of the copper binding site in the apo form is more similar to the oxidised form than to the reduced form.

The observations made in the analysis of these three forms of azurin have implications for the biological function of the protein, which is thought to be electron transfer. The distorted geometry of the copper, which is enforced upon the metal by the protein, supports the concept of the entatic state, whereby the copper is held in a geometry approximating the transition state between the coordination preferences of Cu(II) and

Cu(I). Since minimal changes at the active site occur upon reduction, the protein accomplishes its function of fast electron transfer by minimising the activation energy of the process.

## Erratum

p. 45      Reference number 395 should be 210.

## Table of Contents

<b>Chapter 1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	1
1.1	Copper in Biology	1
1.1.1	Type 1 copper centres	1
1.1.2	Type 2 copper centres	3
1.1.3	Type 3 copper centres	4
1.1.4	Other copper centres	6
1.2	Properties of the blue copper proteins	8
1.2.1	Electronic absorption spectra	8
1.2.2	Electron paramagnetic resonance spectra	9
1.2.3	Redox potential	11
1.2.4	Resonance Raman spectra	12
1.2.5	Nuclear magnetic resonance spectra	14
1.2.6	X-ray absorption spectral studies	16
1.2.7	Three-dimensional structural studies	18
1.2.8	Site Directed Mutagenesis Studies on azurin	22
1.3	Structure-function relationships of azurin and plastocyanin	27
1.3.1	General description of the structure of azurin	27
1.3.2	Comparison of azurin and plastocyanin	32
1.3.3	Reduction of plastocyanin and azurin	35
1.3.4	Apo-plastocyanin and apo-azurin	37
1.3.5	Proposed structural studies on reduced and apo-azurin	39
<b>Chapter 2</b>	<b>Experimental</b>	42
2.1	Preparation of reduced and apo-azurin crystals	42
2.1.1	Preparation of reduced (Cu(I)) azurin crystals	42
2.1.2	Preparation of apo-azurin crystals by soaking in cyanide	42
2.1.3	Crystallization of apo-azurin from solution	44
2.2	X-ray data collection and processing	48
2.2.1	Data collection	48
2.2.2	Data processing	50
2.3	Refinement methods	61
2.3.1	The starting model	61
2.3.2	Restrained refinement	61
2.3.3	PROLSQ and HKPROLSQ(FFT)	62
2.3.4	Rebuilding the models	63
2.3.5	Inclusion of the solvent structure	64

<b>Chapter 3</b>	<b>Reduced azurin</b>	66
3.1	Course of the refinement	66
3.2	The structure of reduced azurin and its comparison with oxidised azurin	76
3.2.1	Crystal packing	76
3.2.2	Conformational angles	79
3.2.3	Hydrogen bonds	83
3.2.4	Superposition of the reduced and oxidised azurin structures	93
3.2.5	Consistent shift vector analysis	97
3.2.6	The copper site	104
3.2.7	Constraints on the copper site	115
3.2.8	Surface features of reduced azurin	125
3.2.9	Thermal parameters	127
3.2.10	Solvent structure	129
3.3	Comparison of the two independent molecules	132
3.3.1	Intermolecular contacts	132
3.3.2	Conformational angles	134
3.3.3	Comparison of the hydrogen bonds	136
3.3.4	Comparison of the main-chain atom positions	138
3.3.5	Comparison of the side-chain atom positions	141
3.3.6	Comparison of the copper site and its surrounds	144
3.3.7	Comparison of B-values	145
3.3.8	Solvent structure	146
<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>Apo-azurin</b>	152
4.1	Refinement of apo-azurin	152
4.2	The structure of apo-azurin	158
4.2.1	Crystal packing	158
4.2.2	Conformational angles	159
4.2.3	Hydrogen bonding	163
4.2.4	Superposition	165
4.2.5	Consistent shift vector analysis	169
4.2.6	The Copper binding site	175
4.2.7	The surrounding environment of the binding site of apo-azurin	192

4.2.8	Thermal parameters	199
4.2.9	Solvent structure	202
4.3	Comparison of the two apo-azurin molecules	204
4.3.1	Lattice contacts	204
4.3.2	Comparison of the main-chain structure	206
4.3.3	Comparison of the side-chain structure	209
4.3.4	Comparison of the hydrogen bonds	212
4.3.5	Comparison of the binding sites and their surrounds	214
4.3.6	Comparison of the solvent structure	216
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>Conclusions and Discussion</b>	<b>218</b>
5.1	Conclusions from the structure of reduced azurin	218
5.1.1	Structural changes upon reduction	218
5.1.2	The Cu...S <sub>8</sub> 121 distance and EXAFS	221
5.1.3	pH-independent redox activity	222
5.2	Conclusions from the structure of apo-azurin	227
5.2.1	Structural changes upon copper removal	227
5.2.2	Rate of copper removal	229
5.2.3	Mechanism for copper incorporation	229
5.3	Implications for biological function	231
5.4	Future directions for research on azurin	242
<b>Appendix A</b>	<b>Ramachandran plots</b>	<b>247</b>
<b>Appendix B</b>	<b>Hydrogen bond geometry</b>	<b>251</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>		<b>257</b>