

A structure-based mechanism for benzalacetone synthase from *Rheum palmatum*

Hiroyuki Morita^a, Yoshihiko Shimokawa^b, Michikazu Tanio^c, Ryohei Kato^d, Hiroshi Noguchi^b, Shigetoshi Sugio^{d,1}, Toshiyuki Kohno^{c,1}, and Ikuro Abe^{a,1}

^aGraduate School of Pharmaceutical Sciences, University of Tokyo, 7-3-1 Hongo, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo 113-0033, Japan; ^bSchool of Pharmaceutical Science, University of Shizuoka, 52-1 Yada, Shizuoka 422-8526, Japan; ^cMitsubishi Kagaku Institute of Life Sciences, 11 Minamiooya, Machida, Tokyo 194-8511, Japan; and ^dInnovation Center Yokohama, Mitsubishi Chemical Corporation, 1000 Kamoshida, Aoba, Yokohama, Kanagawa 227-8502, Japan.

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Benzalacetone synthase (BAS), a plant-specific type III polyketide synthase (PKS), catalyzes a one-step decarboxylative condensation of malonyl-CoA and 4-coumaroyl-CoA to produce the diketide benzalacetone. We solved the crystal structures of both the wild-type and chalcone-producing I207L/L208F mutant of *Rheum palmatum* BAS at 1.8 Å resolution. In addition, we solved the crystal structure of the wild-type enzyme, in which a monoketide coumarate intermediate is covalently bound to the catalytic cysteine residue, at 1.6 Å resolution. This is the first direct evidence that type III PKS utilizes the cysteine as the nucleophile and as the attachment site for the polyketide intermediate. The crystal structures revealed that BAS utilizes an alternative, novel active-site pocket for locking the aromatic moiety of the coumarate, instead of the chalcone synthase's coumaroyl-binding pocket, which is lost in the active-site of the wild-type enzyme and restored in the I207L/L208F mutant. Furthermore, the crystal structures indicated the presence of a putative nucleophilic water molecule which forms hydrogen bond networks with the Cys-His-Asn catalytic triad. This suggested that BAS employs novel catalytic machinery for the thioester bond cleavage of the enzyme-bound diketide intermediate and the final decarboxylation reaction to produce benzalacetone. These findings provided a structural basis for the functional diversity of the type III PKS enzymes.

biosynthesis | enzyme | polyketide

Benzalacetone synthase (BAS), a member of the plant-specific chalcone synthase (CHS) superfamily of type III polyketide synthases (PKSs) (1–3), catalyzes the one-step decarboxylative condensation of 4-coumaroyl-CoA with malonyl-CoA to produce a diketide benzalacetone, 4-(4-hydroxyphenyl)but-3-en-2-one (Fig. 1A and Fig. S1) (4). BAS is a crucial enzyme in the biosynthesis of the C₆-C₄ moiety of biologically active phenylbutanoids such as the antiinflammatory glucoside lindleyin in rhubarb, and raspberry ketone, the characteristic aroma of raspberry fruit. In contrast, the typical type III PKSs catalyze iterative condensations of malonyl-CoA with a CoA-linked starter molecule (Fig. S1) (1–3). For example, CHS and stilbene synthase (STS), sharing ≈70% amino acid sequence identity with BAS, catalyze sequential condensations of 4-coumaroyl-CoA and three molecules of malonyl-CoA to produce the tetraketides naringenin chalcone and resveratrol, respectively. Recent crystallographic analyses of the type III PKSs have revealed that the functional diversity of the CHS-superfamily enzymes is principally derived from the small modifications of the active-site architecture (5–12).

We previously reported that the diketide-forming activity of *Rheum palmatum* BAS is attributed to the characteristic substitution of the active-site Phe215; the conserved CHS residues ²¹⁴LF are uniquely replaced by IL in *R. palmatum* BAS (numbering in *Medicago sativa* CHS, Fig. S2) (13). The conformationally flexible Phe215, located at the junction between the active-site cavity and the CoA-binding tunnel, is absolutely conserved in all of the known type III PKSs, and is considered to facilitate

the decarboxylation of malonyl-CoA by maintaining the orientations of substrates and intermediates during the sequential condensation reactions (5). Indeed, the BAS I207L/L208F mutant (numbering in BAS) restored the chalcone-forming activity, supporting the hypothesis that the replacement of Phe208 in BAS (corresponding to Phe215 in *M. sativa* CHS) accounts for the interruption of the polyketide chain elongation at the diketide stage (13, 14).

We now present the crystal structures of both the wild-type and chalcone-producing I207L/L208F mutant of *R. palmatum* BAS at 1.8 Å resolution. In addition, we solved the crystal structure of the wild-type enzyme, in which a monoketide coumarate intermediate is covalently bound to the catalytic cysteine residue, at 1.6 Å resolution. This is direct evidence that a type III PKS utilizes the cysteine as the nucleophile and as the attachment site for the polyketide intermediate. The crystal structures revealed that BAS utilizes an alternative active-site pocket for locking the aromatic moiety of the coumarate, instead of the CHS's "coumaroyl-binding pocket", and indicated the presence of a putative nucleophilic water molecule that forms hydrogen bond networks with the Cys-His-Asn catalytic triad. These findings have led to a proposal for a unique mechanism of the enzyme reaction and provided a structural basis for the functional diversity of the type III PKS enzymes.

Results and Discussion

Overall Structure of BAS. The homodimeric apo-structure of BAS consists of residues 8–383 of monomer A, and residues 8–382 of monomer B (Fig. S3). Both monomers are nearly identical to each other, with root-mean-square deviations (RMSDs) of 0.44 Å. Each monomer binds the other monomer with a twofold axis, thereby forming a biologically active, symmetric dimer. Upon dimerization, each monomer buries 2200 Å² of its surface, and Met130 protrudes into the other monomer by the formation of a *cis*-peptide bond between Met130 and Pro131 on a loop, to complete the wall of an active-site cavity in each monomer. The catalytic triad of Cys157, His296 and Asn329 is buried deep within each monomer, and sits at the intersection of a traditional 16 Å-long CoA-binding tunnel and a large internal cavity, in a location and orientation very similar to those of the other plant type III PKSs (5–7, 10). The CoA-binding tunnel is connected to the protein surface, thus facilitating the entrance of the substrate into the catalytic center. The overall structures of BAS are highly homologous to those of the previously reported plant type III

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¹To whom correspondence may be addressed. E-mail: ssugio@rc.m-kagaku.co.jp, tkohno@mitils.jp or abei@mol.f.u-tokyo.ac.jp.

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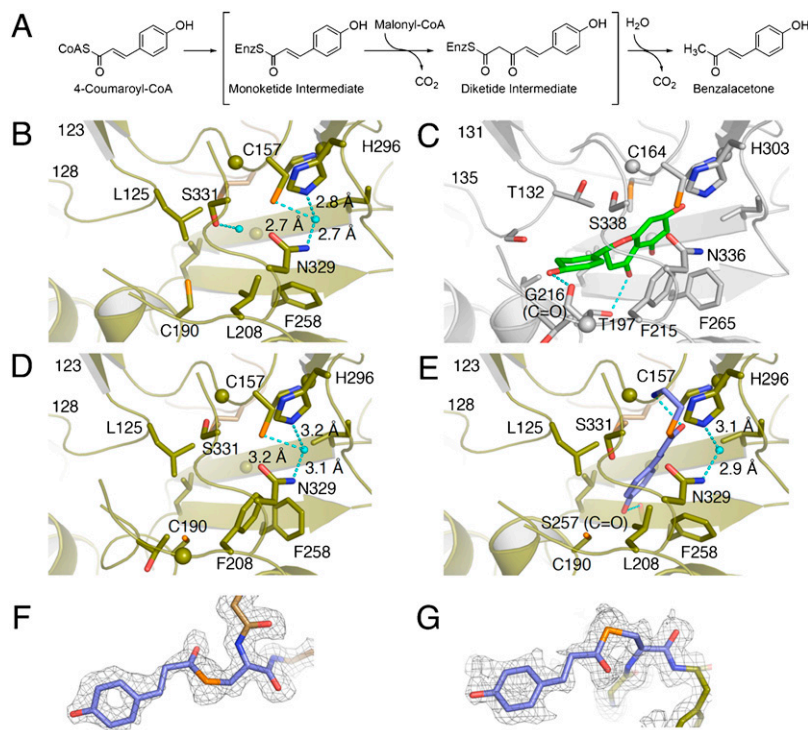


Fig. 1. Enzyme reaction and active-site structure of *R. palmatum* BAS. (A) Proposed mechanism for the formation of benzalacetone by BAS. The active-site structures of wild-type BAS apo (B), *M. sativa* CHS (C), BAS I207L/L208F mutant (D), and wild-type BAS with the covalently bound coumarate (E). The coumarate and naringenin molecules are shown as blue and green stick models, respectively. The water molecule and the hydrogen bonds are indicated with light-blue spheres and dotted lines, respectively. The F_o-F_c density map of the monoketide intermediate covalently bound to the catalytic Cys157 (F) in monomer A, and in monomer B of wild-type BAS, countered at 2.0 σ (G).

PKSs, including *M. sativa* CHS (5) and *Pinus sylvestris* STS (7), with RMSDs of 0.66 Å and 0.73 Å, respectively, for the C α -atoms (Fig. S3).

Active-Site Architecture of BAS. As previously reported (13), the benzalacetone-forming activity of *R. palmatum* BAS is attributed to the characteristic substitution of the conserved active-site Phe215 (numbering in *M. sativa* CHS) with leucine. Indeed, a comparison of the active-site structure of *R. palmatum* BAS with that of *M. sativa* CHS revealed that both the location and angle of the planar residue Phe215 of *M. sativa* CHS are well conserved in Leu208 of BAS, but the C δ carbon of the Leu208 side-chain protrudes into the CHS's active-site cavity, thereby causing a substantial contraction of the active-site cavity of BAS (Fig. 1B and C). In addition, in *R. palmatum* BAS, the terminal hydroxyl group of Ser331 is isometric with that of the corresponding Ser338 in *M. sativa* CHS. The serine residue neighboring the catalytic cysteine is considered to be crucial for modulation of the catalytic activity (7). In fact, we previously reported that the BAS S331 V mutant exhibited a twofold increase in the $k_{\text{cat}}/K_{\text{M}}$ value for the benzalacetone-producing activity, which suggested that the residue is important for providing steric guidance for the diketide formation reaction (14). In the BAS crystal structure, the hydroxyl group of Ser331 rotates by nearly 120°, thereby blocking the entrance of the CHS's coumaroyl-binding pocket (5). Moreover, a structural comparison with *M. sativa* CHS revealed significant backbone changes in the loops corresponding to residues 123–128 in *R. palmatum* BAS and the residues 131–135 in *M. sativa* CHS, respectively (RMSDs of 1.00 Å for the C α -atoms, Fig. 1B and C). This movement is caused by various neighboring amino acid substitutions at the loop, most notably the replacement of Val98 in *M. sativa* CHS with the bulkier side-chain Gln in BAS, with the result that the backbone torsion angle of Leu125 (–51, –42), as compared with that of Thr132

(–112, 6), is shifted by a ϕ angle of –61° and a ψ angle of +48° toward Leu208 in BAS. A similar situation has also been found in the crystal structure of resveratrol-forming *P. sylvestris* STS (7), which will be discussed later. The conformational differences of Leu208 and Ser331 cause the loss of the CHS's coumaroyl-binding pocket (5) from the BAS active-site cavity. As a result, the total cavity volume (350 Å³) of the active site of BAS is much smaller than that of *M. sativa* CHS (750 Å³) (Fig. 2A and B), suggesting that the steric contraction leads to the shorter diketide-forming activity of BAS (Fig. 2D and E).

Phe258 in *R. palmatum* BAS and the corresponding Phe265 in *M. sativa* CHS are located at the entrance of the active-site, as in the case of the above mentioned Leu208 in BAS and Phe215 in CHS. The backbone torsion angle of Phe258 (–131, 118), in comparison with that of Phe265 (–123, 131), is slightly shifted by a ϕ angle of +8° and a ψ angle of +13°, and the aromatic moiety of Phe258 protrudes more toward Leu208, as compared to that of Phe265 of *M. sativa* CHS, and forms a hydrophobic interaction with the side-chain of Leu208 (Fig. 1B and C, and Fig. S4). Although positional differences of this gatekeeper phenylalanine are often observed in the type III PKSs (7), this conformational change appears to be caused by the F208L substitution in BAS. The total area of the active-site entrance of BAS is thus ≈ 34 Å², which is twice as large as that of *M. sativa* CHS (17 Å²) (Fig. S4). A similar widening of the active-site entrance has also been reported for the structure of the *M. sativa* F215S CHS mutant, which accepts the bulky *N*-methylantraniloyl-CoA as a starter substrate (15). Noel and coworkers (15) have proposed that the F215S substitution opens the space at the cavity entrance to accommodate the methylamine moiety of *N*-methylantraniloyl-CoA and facilitates the positioning of the thioester-carbonyl moiety next to the Cys-His-Asn catalytic triad. These observations may also account for the previous report that *R. palmatum* BAS readily accepts *N*-methylantraniloyl-CoA as a starter substrate

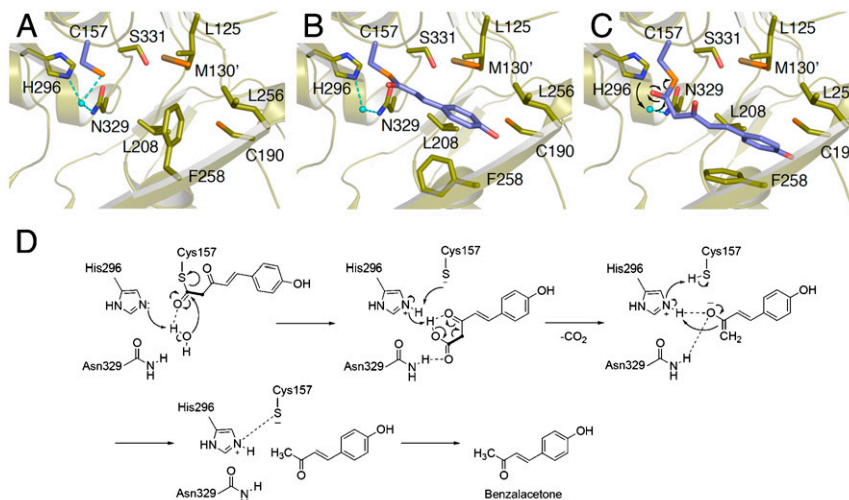


Fig. 3. Proposed mechanism for the BAS enzyme reaction. The active-site structures of the apo (A) and the coumarate-bound BAS (B), respectively. Three-dimensional model for the diketide intermediate covalently bound to the catalytic cysteine. The putative nucleophilic water molecule is shown as a light-blue sphere. The dotted lines indicate the hydrogen bond (C). Proposed mechanism for the enzyme catalyzed hydrolysis and decarboxylation reaction (D).

water molecule is also sterically conserved in the structure of the BAS I207L/L208F mutant (Fig. 1E and Fig. S4).

Since the chalcone-forming I207L/L208F mutant still produces benzalacetone (13), both the wild-type and mutant enzymes could possibly maintain the same catalytic machinery for the formation of benzalacetone. Furthermore, as described above, the BAS S331V mutant, in which the corresponding Ser338 in the aldol-switch hydrogen bond network is substituted with the hydrophobic Val, exhibited a twofold increase in the k_{cat}/K_M value for the benzalacetone-producing activity (14). In addition, we have recently successfully detected the 4-coumaroyl β -keto acid, 5-(4-hydroxyphenyl)-3-oxopent-4-enoic acid, in the reaction products of BAS (Fig. S6). All of these observations strongly suggest that BAS utilizes alternative and unique catalytic machinery, which is distinct from that of STS, for the thioester bond cleavage of the enzyme-bound intermediate and the final decarboxylation reaction, and that the β -keto acid produced by the nucleophilic attack of the water molecule, presumably activated by His296, subsequently undergoes decarboxylation to yield the C_6 - C_4 benzalacetone (Fig. 3D). Thus, we propose that the decarboxylation of the β -keto acid proceeds *via* proton abstraction by His296, reactivated by the Cys157 thiolate, and formation of an enolate anion presumably stabilized by the His296-Asn329 oxanyan hole, just as in the case of the decarboxylation of malonyl-CoA (2). Finally, tautomerization to the keto form produces benzalacetone and restores the Cys157-His296 thiolate-imidazolium ion pair (Fig. 3D).

Recently, 2'-oxoalkylresorcylic acid synthase (ORAS), which catalyzes the condensation of four molecules of malonyl-CoA with a long-chain acyl-CoA thioester (C_{16} , C_{18} and C_{20}) as a starter substrate to produce the pentaketide alkylresorcylic acid and resorcinol, has been characterized from *Neurospora crassa* (Fig. S1) (12, 17). The stable resorcinol acid is considered to be an intermediate which is further enzymatically converted into the final alkylresorcinol product by a decarboxylation reaction. In spite of the similar catalytic process to that of STS, the crystallographic analysis of ORAS revealed that, unlike STS, the enzyme structure does not share the aldol switch in the active-site cavity (12). In contrast, our structural analyses revealed that the location of the putative nucleophilic water molecule in BAS is nearly identical to that of the sulfinic oxygen of the oxidized catalytic cysteine in ORAS (Fig. S7). Therefore, it is quite probable that the sulfinic oxygen in ORAS can be regarded as an analog of the nucleophilic water molecule in BAS, and that the resorcinol

acid is released from ORAS, as in the case of the β -keto acid in BAS.

In conclusion, the crystal structures revealed that BAS utilizes an alternative, unique active-site pocket for locking the aromatic moiety of the coumarate, instead of the coumaroyl-binding pocket, which is lost in the active site of the wild-type enzyme and restored in the I207L/L208F mutant. Furthermore, the crystal structures indicated the presence of a putative nucleophilic water molecule which forms hydrogen bond networks with the Cys-His-Asn catalytic triad. This suggested that BAS employs unique catalytic machinery for the thioester bond cleavage of the enzyme-bound diketide intermediate and the final decarboxylation reaction to produce benzalacetone. These findings provide a structural basis for the functional diversity of the type III PKS enzymes.

Methods

Chemicals. 4-coumaroyl-CoA was synthesized as described previously. Oligonucleotides were obtained from Hokkaido System Science Co., Ltd. Standard chemicals were obtained from Sigma-Aldrich and Hampton Research.

Expression and Purification. Wild-type BAS was expressed in *E. coli* M15 and purified as described previously (18). The L207L/L208F mutant expression plasmid was constructed with a QuikChange Site-Directed Mutagenesis Kit (Stratagene), according to the manufacturer's protocol, by using 5'-CCATGATAGGCCAA GCATTATTCGGCGATGGGGCTGC-3' as the sense primer, 5'-GCGACCCCATCGCC GAATAATGCTTGGCCATCATGG-3' as the antisense primer, and the wild-type BAS expression plasmid as the template. The mutant protein was expressed and purified by the same procedure used for the wild-type BAS, and was concentrated to 20 mg/mL in 20 mM HEPES-NaOH (pH7.5) buffer, containing 100 mM NaCl and 2 mM DTT.

Crystallization. Crystallization of the wild-type BAS was performed as previously reported (18). The I207L/L208F mutant crystals were also obtained by the same crystallization methods as those used for the wild-type BAS. Both crystals were independently transferred to a reservoir solution with 20% (v/v) glycerol as a cryoprotectant, and were then flash-cooled at 100 K in a nitrogen-gas stream. For the monoketide intermediate-complexed crystal of the wild type, a single crystal, as described above, was captured in a nylon loop and transferred to the reservoir solution containing 2 mM 4-coumaroyl-CoA. After an incubation at 20° for 2 d, the crystal was transferred to the same cryoprotectant as that used for the wild-type and mutant apo crystals, except that it also contained 4-coumaroyl-CoA.

Structure Determination. Both X-ray diffraction datasets from the wild-type BAS crystals were collected at 100 K at BL24XU of SPring-8 (wavelength, 0.82656 Å), by using a Rigaku R-AXIS V imaging plate. The X-ray diffraction

dataset from the mutant crystal was collected at 100 K at BL41XU of SPring-8 (wavelength, 1.00000 Å), by using an ADSC Quantum 210 CCD detector. All data were indexed, integrated, and scaled with the HKL2000 program (19).

The initial phases of the wild-type apo structure were determined by molecular replacement by using the BAS structure model generated by the SWISS-MODEL package (<http://expasy.ch/spdpv/>) based on the crystal structure of *M. sativa* CHS [Protein Data Bank (PDB) entry 1BQ6], as a search model. The molecular replacement was performed with the program Crystallography and NMR System (CNS) (20). Crystallographic refinement and model building were performed with CNS and XTALVIEW (21), respectively. Each refinement cycle was followed by model building using the σ_A -weighted $2F_o - F_c$ and $F_o - F_c$ electron density maps. The water molecules were automatically placed into the difference electron density maps with XTALVIEW, and were retained or rejected on the basis of geometric criteria as well as their refined B-factors. After several rounds of model building and refinement, the final model was obtained. The other structures were solved by the same procedure as used for the model refinement of the BAS wild-type apo structure, except for the use of either the entire or I204L/L208F-substituted final models of the wild-type apo structure as the search model in the molecular replacement methods. Both the $2F_o - F_c$ and $F_o - F_c$ maps indicated the presence of a portion of the monoketide intermediate covalently bound to the catalytic cysteine of each monomer in the intermediate-complexed structure, and the intermediate manually fits into the visible electron density. Each model consists of residues 8–383 of monomer A, and residues 8–382 of monomer B. The qualities of the final models were assessed with PROCHECK (22). Details of the data collection, processing, and structure refinement are summarized in Table S1. The cavity volume and the active-site entrance area were calculated by the program CASTP (<http://cast.engr.uic.edu/cast/>). All crystallographic figures were prepared with PyMOL (DeLano Scientific, <http://www.pymol.org>).

Enzyme Reaction. The reaction mixture contained 54 μM of 4-coumaroyl-CoA, 108 μM of malonyl-CoA, and 20 μg of the purified wild-type enzyme in a final

volume of 500 μL of 100 mM Tris-HCl buffer (pH 8.0) and 1 mM EDTA. Incubations were performed at 30 °C for 1 hr, and were stopped by the addition of 50 μL of 20% HCl. The products were then extracted with 3 mL of ethyl acetate. The products were separated by reverse-phase HPLC (JASCO 880) on a TSK-gel ODS-80Ts column (4.6 Å 150 mm, TOSOH), at a flow rate of 0.8 mL/min. Gradient elution was performed with H₂O and MeOH, both containing 0.1% TFA: 0–5 min, 30% MeOH; 5–17 min, linear gradient from 30 to 60% MeOH; 17–25 min, 60% MeOH; 25–27 min, linear gradient from 60 to 70% MeOH. Elutions were monitored by a multichannel UV detector (MULTI 340, JASCO) at 280 nm. UV spectra (198–400 nm) were recorded every 0.4 s. Online LC-ESIMS spectra were measured with an Agilent Technologies series 1100 HPLC coupled to a Bruker Daltonics esquire4000 ion-trap mass spectrometer fitted with an ESI source. HPLC separations were performed under the same conditions as described above. The ESI capillary temperature and the capillary voltage were 320 °C and 4.0 V, respectively. The tube lens offset was set at 20.0 V. All spectra were obtained in the positive mode over a mass range of m/z 50–500, and at a range of one scan every 0.2 s. The collision gas was helium, and the relative collision energy scale was set at 30.0% (1.5 eV).

Spectroscopic Data for (*E*)-5-(4-Hydroxyphenyl)-3-Oxopent-4-Enoic Acid (4-Coumaroyl Diketide β -Keto Acid). UV λ_{max} 283 nm; LC-ESIMS: MS, m/z 207 $[\text{M} + \text{H}]^+$, MS/MS (precursor ion at m/z 207), m/z 147 $[\text{M} + \text{H} - \text{CO}_2 - \text{CH}_2]^+$; HRMS (FAB) found for $[\text{C}_{11}\text{H}_{11}\text{O}_4]^+$ 207.0668, calculated value 207.0657.

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