

BIOCHEMICAL JOURNAL LETTERS

The PLEES proteins: a family of structurally related enzymes widely distributed from bacteria to humans

Aromatic compounds including biphenyls and polychlorinated-biphenyls (PCBs) are among the most serious and persistent environmental pollutants, owing to their chemical stability and widespread industrial use [1]. Over the last few years, a variety of bacterial strains with the ability to degrade these aromatic compounds have been isolated and used for the bioremediation of contaminated soil and water. These micro-organisms use different enzymes for the initial attack on the diverse aromatic substrates, but the catabolic pathways converge on just a few central intermediates such as catechol or substituted catechols. The conversion of catechols into tricarboxylic-acid-cycle intermediates is mediated in many cases by common enzymic steps called the *meta*-cleavage pathway. One of the key reactions in this route is catalysed by a serine hydrolase called BphD, which has the ability to perform the hydrolytic cleavage of carbon-carbon bonds, one of the rarest of all enzyme reaction types [2]. At present, eight bacterial hydrolases catalysing this type of reaction have been characterized at the amino-acid-sequence level. These hydrolases are involved in the degradation of biphenyls and their polychlorinated derivatives and show a high degree of sequence similarity. The recent isolation, from a breast carcinoma cDNA library, of a novel human serine hydrolase (Bph-rp) [3], with sequence similarity to the bacterial BphD enzymes involved in PCB degradation, led us to search for common motifs within these enzymes which might establish possible functional relationships between them.

A search against a nonredundant protein sequence database (SWISS-PROT Release 33.0, PIR Release 47.0, CDS translations from GenBank Release 95.0 and daily updates of these databases until 12 June 1996) with human Bph-rp using BLASTP [4] resulted in a series of statistically significant hits with other bacterial serine hydrolases involved in the degradation of a variety of aromatic compounds, including toluene, benzoate, phenol and xylenes [probability of matching by chance (P) < 10^{-5}]. In addition, significant similarities were also found with bacterial lipases, esterases, peroxidases, haloalkane dehalogenases and proline iminopeptidases, as well as with epoxide hydrolases, acylaminoacyl peptidases, dipeptidyl peptidases and prolyl oligopeptidases from different organisms, including yeast, plants and mammals [5–7]. A multiple sequence alignment was constructed using the sequence analysis program MACAW [8] (Figure 1). This analysis identified six regions displaying the highest degree of sequence similarities to Bph-rp, from 59–60% with serine hydrolases, esterases and lipases, to 55–57% with peroxidases, haloalkane dehalogenases, epoxide hydrolases and peptidases. Three of these blocks (III, IV and V) were conserved around the amino acids which would form the catalytic triad (Ser/Asp)-(Asp/Glu)-His, characteristic of all these proteins, and presumed to be essential for their enzymic activity. This catalytic triad is reminiscent of the archetypal one present in serine proteinases and originally described in chymotrypsin [10], but with opposite handedness.

The sequence similarity of the proteins aligned in Figure 1, together with the presence of a catalytic triad (Ser/Asp)-(Asp/Glu)-His with high conserved patterns around the residues forming the active centre, and the conservation of several residues which would play an important role in the conformation of these enzymes, led us to propose that these proteins may have very similar three-dimensional structures. In this regard, it is worthwhile mentioning that the three-dimensional structure of some of the proteins with similarity to human Bph-rp has been elucidated by X-ray crystallography [11,12], and in all cases they are organized into an α/β hydrolase fold, which is characterized by the presence of a central β -pleated sheet surrounded by α -helices [13]. Therefore it is likely that, in addition to their similarities in amino acid sequences and enzymic mechanism, the different proteins aligned in Figure 1 may also share a similar α/β folding.

Since virtually all these proteins related to human Bph-rp can be classified as peptidases, lipases, esterases, epoxide-hydrolases, or serine hydrolases, we propose to call them 'PLEES' enzymes. These proteins could thus constitute a large family of structurally related enzymes which are able to metabolize a wide variety of substrates by using a common mechanism based on a catalytic triad of topologically conserved (nucleophile)-(acid)-(histidine) residues. The definition of this protein superfamily would extend previous studies describing relationships among serine hydrolases [14–16]. However, although most of the PLEES proteins are hydrolytic enzymes, it is remarkable that the members of the PLEES family of proteins are not exclusively restricted to this activity, and the group includes proteins like bacterial peroxidases, with ability to catalyse the synthesis of carbon-halogen bonds rather than any type of hydrolytic reaction [12]. It should also be stressed that although PLEES proteins may adopt an α/β hydrolase fold, not all proteins possessing an α/β hydrolase structure would be PLEES proteins. Thus there are a number of α/β -hydrolase-fold proteins, including wheat carboxy-peptidase [17] or cutinase [18], which do not show significant similarity with human Bph-rp, nor with the remaining proteins included in the alignment shown in Figure 1. Finally, the finding that PLEES enzymes include bacterial, fungal, plant and mammalian enzymes suggests that they could have evolved from a common ancestor that became adapted to perform a wide array of biological functions in the different organisms in which they have been identified. The identification of these similarities between proteins from organisms that diverged about 2 billion years ago [19] will be helpful for future structure-function relationship studies of the different family members and, in particular, in those directed to elucidate the role of human Bph-rp in both normal and pathological conditions, including breast cancer.

This work was supported by grants SAF94-0892 (Comisión Interministerial de Ciencia y Tecnología) and Glaxo-Wellcome, Spain. X. S. P. is recipient of a Fellowship from FICYT, Asturias, Spain.

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Received 4 November 1996