

Cloning, sequencing and functional assignment of the chlorophyll biosynthesis gene, *chlP*, of *Synechocystis* sp. PCC 6803

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Received 9 May 1996

Abstract A gene from the cyanobacterium *Synechocystis* sp. PCC 6803 has been cloned and sequenced, and subsequently used to partially complement a *bchP* mutant of the purple photosynthetic bacterium *Rhodobacter sphaeroides*. This mutant is blocked in the terminal hydrogenation steps of *bchl*a biosynthesis and possesses only *bchl* esterified with geranylgeraniol. It also has a reduced cellular level of the light-harvesting LH2 complex, and the 850 nm absorbance maximum of LH2 is red-shifted by approximately 6 nm. Upon heterologous expression of the *Synechocystis* *bchP* homologue, not only are hydrogenated forms of *bchl*aGG detectable, but the level of LH2 is increased and the red-shift reversed by several nm. We conclude that this gene, which we term *chlP*, encodes the enzyme catalysing the stepwise hydrogenation of geranylgeraniol to phytol during *chl*a biosynthesis.

Key words: Photosynthesis; (Bacterio)chlorophyll; *Synechocystis*; *Rhodobacter*; Hydrogenase; Phytol

1. Introduction

The biosynthesis of chlorophyll (*chl*) and bacteriochlorophyll (*bchl*) molecules is essential for the formation of photosynthetic complexes. The final stage in the synthesis of *chl*a and *bchl*a is the esterification of the tetrapyrrole moiety, chlorophyllide or bacteriochlorophyllide respectively, with an alcohol. The commonest of these esterifying alcohols is the C₂₀ isoprenoid, phytol. However, principally as a result of kinetic studies analysing the accumulation and loss of chlorophyll esters, it has become apparent that phytol is often not the initial esterifying alcohol. Rather, the tetrapyrrole is esterified with an activated form of the biosynthetic precursor of phytol, geranylgeranyl pyrophosphate (GGPP), which subsequently undergoes successive reductions of three of its four C–C double bonds to generate the final pigment (Fig. 1). This is probably true of *bchl*a biosynthesis [1,2]. In plants, it seems that this pathway [3–5], and the direct phytylation route involving the attachment of phytyl pyrophosphate (PPP) to chlorophyllide, may exist side by side, with different pathways predominating at different stages of development or with different substrate availabilities [6–8]. A GGPP reductase catalysing the conversion of free GGPP to PPP has been located in the chloroplast envelope and has been shown to produce

more PPP than is required for the competing reactions of tocopherol and phyloquinone synthesis [6]. The hydrogenase catalysing the stepwise reduction of the GG side-chain of *chl*a to P has been shown to be located in the thylakoid membrane [6], as has the enzyme activity, termed chlorophyll synthetase, which esterifies chlorophyllide with either GGPP or PPP [6,9,10].

A number of steps in the magnesium branch of tetrapyrrole biosynthesis have been elucidated through overexpression of the relevant genes in *E. coli*. This was reported for the methyltransferase gene, *bchM*, of *Rhodobacter capsulatus* [11] and *R. sphaeroides* [12], and subsequently it was shown that the genes *bchH*, *I*, and *D* encode subunits of magnesium chelatase, using the same approach [13]. More recently, this has been extended to the assignment of the function of *chlH*, *I* and *D* in the *chl*a-containing cyanobacterium *Synechocystis* sp. PCC 6803 [14]. All of these studies built upon earlier work on *bchl* biosynthesis initiated in purple photosynthetic bacteria, such as the assignments of gene function from the construction of *bchl*-deficient mutants by insertional mutagenesis (for example [11,15]). Such mutants are also useful as recipients for DNA from organisms other than *Rhodobacter* so that gene assignments can be made in these other organisms. For example, fragments of DNA from *Synechocystis* may restore pigment synthesis to *bchl*-deficient mutants of *Rhodobacter*. Such a complementation approach, which relies on functional homology rather than sequence homology, was used by Suzuki and Bauer [16] to isolate the gene encoding the light-driven protochlorophyllide reductase from *Synechocystis* by complementation of *bchN*, *bchB* and *bchL* mutants of *R. capsulatus*. In this study, we report the cloning and sequencing of a gene from *Synechocystis*, and its subsequent use to partially complement a *bchP* mutant of *R. sphaeroides*. This mutant is blocked in the terminal hydrogenation steps of *bchl*a biosynthesis and possesses only *bchl* esterified with GG. Also, the cellular level of the light-harvesting LH2 complex is significantly reduced and its B850 absorbance maximum is red-shifted by approximately 6 nm. Upon heterologous expression of the *Synechocystis* *bchP* homologue, not only are hydrogenated forms of *bchl*aGG detectable, but the level of LH2 is increased and the red shift reversed by several nm. We conclude that this gene, which we term *chlP*, encodes the enzyme catalysing the stepwise hydrogenation of GG to P during *chl*a biosynthesis. This may occur either at the activated, pyrophosphate level or following chlorophyllide esterification.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Isolation of a *bchP* homologue from *Synechocystis*

The degenerate oligonucleotides 5'-GGGAATCC(AGCT)-

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Abbreviations: *bchl*, bacteriochlorophyll; *chl*, chlorophyll; GG, geranylgeraniol; GGPP, geranylgeranyl pyrophosphate; P, phytol; PPP, phytyl pyrophosphate; DHGG, dihydro-GG; THGG, tetrahydro-GG; LH1, light-harvesting complex 1; LH2, light-harvesting complex 2; HPLC, high-pressure liquid chromatography; ORF, open reading frame

GA(CT)TT(CT)TA(CT)GG(AGCT)TGGGT(AGCT)TT-3' and 5'-GGTCTAGAGC(AG)(AT)A(AG)TA(AGT)AT(AGCT)CC(CT)TC-(AGCT)CC-3' were designed according to the regions of derived amino acid similarity between orf391 (*bchP*) of the *R. capsulatus* photosynthetic gene cluster (J.E. Hearst, EMBL sequence submission, accession number Z11165; [2]) and an expressed sequence tag from *Arabidopsis thaliana* identified via its homology to *bchP*. These were used to amplify a 284 bp fragment from genomic DNA of *Synechocystis* sp. PCC 6803 by PCR. This was sequenced and the deduced amino acid sequence was found to display significant similarity to each of the original sequences.

A *Synechocystis* sp. PCC 6803 genomic DNA library constructed in vector Lambda GEM-11 (Promega) was plated out in *E. coli* strain KW251 (Promega). The library was screened using the amplified *Synechocystis* fragment, and a genomic clone of approximately 20 kb was isolated. Restriction digestion and probing of Southern blots were used to identify a *XhoI*-*HindIII* fragment of approximately 3.5 kb which contained the previously amplified sequence. This fragment was subcloned into pBluescript II SK+ (Stratagene), for sequencing.

2.2. DNA sequencing

This was carried out on an ABI 373A sequencer using an ABI DyeDeoxy reagent kit (Perkin Elmer).

2.3. Complementation of a *R. sphaeroides* mutant

The oligonucleotides 5'-TTTCTCTAGAGGAGACGACCAT-A1GGTATTACGGGTAGCAGTCGTG-3' and 5'-GTTGAAGC-TTGGATCCTTAAGGGGCTAAAGCGTTACCCCG-3' were used to amplify the *chlP* gene by PCR, and introduce *XbaI* and *HindIII* sites which enabled cloning into pRKEB, yielding plasmid pEBchlP. Also, the start codon (underlined) was mutated from TTG to ATG because ATG is the most frequent start codon in both *E. coli* and *R. sphaeroides*. Plasmid pRKEB consists of the *EcoRI*-*Bam*III fragment of pRKEK [17], containing the strong *puf* operon promoter, cloned into pRK415 [18]. Both pRKEB and pEBchlP were transformed into *E. coli* strain S17-1 [19], permitting conjugative transfer of each of the plasmids into the *bchP* transposon Tn5 mutant T6G5 of *R. sphaeroides* strain NCIB 8253 (Addelee and Hunter, unpublished). *R. sphaeroides* strains were grown in M22+ medium [20]. For *R. sphaeroides*, antibiotic concentrations were neomycin 20 µg/ml and tetracycline 1 µg/ml.

2.4. Pigment extractions and high pressure liquid chromatography

Pigments were extracted from dark, semi-aerobically grown cultures of *R. sphaeroides* using acetone/methanol 7:2 (v/v). Bchl_a esters were separated by HPLC on a Merck LiChrospher 100 RP-18 column (250 x 4 mm, i.d.). The flow rate was 1 ml/min with an initial composition of 64% methanol, 16% acetone, 20% water, changing over the course of 10 min to 80% methanol, 20% acetone. This buffer composition was maintained for 15 min, during which time the bchl_a esters were eluted. Elution of bchls was monitored using a Waters 996 photodiode array detector, scanning from 350 to 800 nm every 2 seconds. The chromatograms at 365 nm were derived from the accumulated absorbance scans using the Millennium software [Waters]. Using this system, bchl_aGG eluted at approximately 18.4 min, bchl_aDHGG at approximately 19 min, bchl_aTHGG at approximately 19.8 min, and bchl_aP at approximately 20.7 min.

2.5. Whole cell absorbance spectroscopy

Absorbance spectra of dark, semi-aerobically grown cultures at identical cell densities were obtained on a Guided Wave Model 260 spectrophotometer.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Sequence of the *chlP* gene

Fig. 2A shows the sequence of the *Synechocystis* DNA isolated and sequenced in this study. It contains an ORF of 1224 bp which is preceded by a putative ribosome binding sequence (AGGAG). The start codon is TTG, a feature which is shared with the *frxC* (*chlL*) gene of the same organism [21]. The predicted product of this gene has 37% identity with the product of the *R. capsulatus bchP* gene (Fig. 2B). We have there-

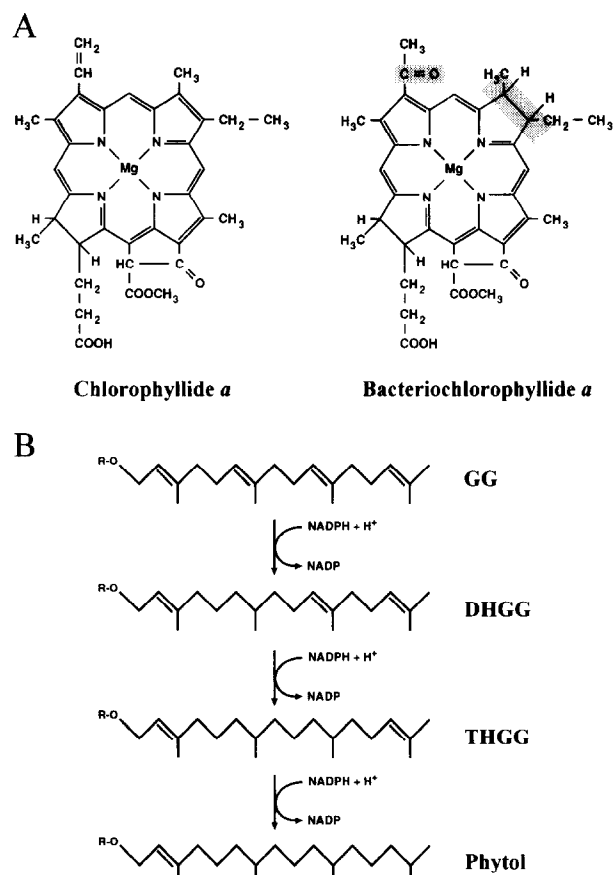


Fig. 1. (A) Structures of chlorophyllide *a* and bacteriochlorophyllide *a*. The reduced B ring and the hydrated 2-vinyl substituent of bacteriochlorophyllide are shaded. (B) The terminal hydrogenation steps of (bacterio)chlorophyll biosynthesis. R represents either chlorophyllide, bacteriochlorophyllide or a diphosphate group.

fore designated this *Synechocystis* gene *chlP*. The predicted protein has a molecular weight of 44 869.

3.2. Expression of the *chlP* gene in a *R. sphaeroides bchP* mutant, and analysis of the resulting phenotype

The PCR-amplified *chlP* gene was cloned into pRKEB, generating plasmid pEBchlP. When this was introduced into the *R. sphaeroides bchP* mutant T6G5, the bchl_a ester composition, as determined by HPLC analysis of acetone/methanol extracts of whole cells, was markedly altered (Fig. 3). In the presence of pRKEB alone, the composition was unchanged from that in the absence of an expression vector, the only detectable bchl_a ester being bchl_aGG. In contrast, plasmid pEBchlP partially restored the pigment composition to wild type, with significant levels of bchl_aP (approx. 5.8%) being present. A similar proportion of a pigment identified as the second partially hydrogenated intermediate, bchl_aTHGG, was also detected. The principal esters present, however, were identified as bchl_aGG and the first partially hydrogenated intermediate, bchl_aDHGG, with the proportion of the latter pigment being slightly greater.

Whole cell absorption spectra of the bchl_aGG-containing mutant T6G5, with or without pRKEB present (Fig. 4A), show lowered cellular levels of LH2 in comparison with the wild type (Fig. 4C). Furthermore, the B850 peak is red-shifted by approximately 6 nm. Such effects are not unexpected, since

A

TTTTTATAAAGAAATTTAGGAGAAAGGCTTTGGTATTACGGGTAGCACTCGTTGGAGGA 60
 M V L R V A V V G G
 GGGCCCGTGGTTCTTCGCGCCGCGAATTTAGTAAAGCCGGAATTGAAACCTACCTG 120
 G P A G S S A A E I L V K A G I E T Y L
 TTTGAGCGTAAGCTAGACAACGCCAACCTGTGGGAGCAATCCCTCTGTATGGT 180
 F E R K L D N A K P C G G A I P L C M V
 GATGAGTTTATCTGCCCGCGAATCATTGACCGCGGTACGGAGATGAAATGATC 240
 D E F D L P P E I I D R R V R K M K M I
 TCCCTTCCAACATCGAGGTCAACATCGGTGAGACCTCAAGGACGACGAATATATCGGC 300
 S F S N I E V N I G Q T L K D D E Y I G
 ATGTCCCGCGGGAAGTCTGGATGGTTTCTCCGGGACGGCGGAGAACTGGGTACA 360
 M C R R E V L D G F L R E R A E K L G T
 AAAGTCATTAAATGGCACCGTTTATAAATAGACATTCCTAGCAAGATAGTATCCCTAC 420
 K V I N G T V Y K L D I P S K D S D P Y
 ACCCTCCATATGCCGACACAGCGTTGGTGGCACTGGGAAATGAAATCCTAAAT 480
 T L H Y A D H S V G G T T G E M K I L K
 GTAGATGTGGTATTGGGCTGATGGCGCTAATCTCGCATGCCAAGCCATTGACGCT 540
 V D V V I G A D G A N S R I A K A I D A
 GGGGATTACACTATGCGATCGCTTCAAGAGCGGATTCGTCTGCCGGAAGACAAATG 600
 G D Y N Y A I A F Q E R I R L P E D K M
 GCCTACTACGATGAATAGCAGAAATGTATGGGCGATGACGTTTCTCCGGATTCTAC 660
 A Y Y D E L A E M Y V G D D V S P D F Y
 GCCTGGGTATCCCAAAATATGACACGTGGCGGTGGGACCGGACCATGAAGTGAA 720
 A W V F P K Y D H V A V G T G T M K V N
 AAAGCCCGCATCAAGACTTACAGGCTGCGATCCGACCGGGCTGCCAAAACTAGAA 780
 K A R I K D L Q A G I R T R A A K K L E
 GCGGAGAAATCATCAAGTGAAGCCATCCCATCTGAAACATCCCGGCGCGCGG 840
 G G E I I K V E A H P I P E H P R P R R
 GTGGTGTGATGAGCCCTAGTGGGGATGCCGCTGGTACCGTCAACCAATCCTCTGGG 900
 V V G R V A L V G D A A G T V T K S S G
 GAAGGCTTTACTTTCGCGCAATCCGCGGTATGTGGGAAACCATGTGGCCACC 960
 E G I Y F A A K S A R M C A E T I V A T
 AGCAATAATGGCAACGGGTGCCACCGAGCGATCGAAACAATACATCAACAATGG 1020
 S N N G Q R V F T E A D L K Q Y I K Q W
 GATAAACGCTACGGCGCTACCTATTTGGTGTGATATTCGCAACGGGTCTCTATCGC 1080
 D K R Y G A T Y L V L D I L Q R V F Y R
 ACCGATGCCACAGAGAAGCCTTTGGGAAATGTGTTCCGACATCGATGTGCAAAAGCTA 1140
 T D A T R E A F V E H C S D I D V Q K L
 ACTTTGACAGTTACCTGTACAAAACCGTGGTACCGCCCAATCCATTGGTGCAATGAAA 1200
 T F D S Y L Y K T V V P A N P L V Q M K
 ATTACCGCCAAACCATTGGTGTGCTGCGCGCTAACCGTTTACCCCTTAATGCTAA 1260
 I T A K T I G S L L R G N A L A P

B

K Y D A F T W D M A R L K V A L D A - G R I 39
 V L R V A S E I L V K I E T Y F E K L D N A 40
 P R L I R D I D H L L V A K I T S A R T G R F D P 79
 L C M V D E L P E I D R R V R K M K S N I E N G 80
 I - - - E N G F V V D D Y E W G A A E R L T W L R I 116
 Q T L K D D E Y I C R V L G F E L D T K V I N V Y K L 120
 E - - - R G K T V V W R K V T E - - - A - E T R 149
 D I P S K D P Y T L H Y A N S V G T T G I L K V D 160
 Q V R N E V P T K I P L V F Y H I K A T T V A N D P T R C D V 189
 R I A K A I D G D Y N Y A I F Q R R L E D K M A Y D E L A E M 200
 Y D G R I G H G K T A S I M - E L F D V S L C T T L 228
 V C D D V A M Y D H V A V T M K V N K A R I E Q A G 240
 L Q N S G - - D K E T R K G A L Q L D V W D N K D V S 266
 I T R A A K K E G G I K V A H E H R P R R V V R - A V 279
 V T A P Y H A G G Y A A A K F L K S K P - - - 304
 T T V F A K S A M C T I V T S N N Q R V P T 319
 - L A R A G F M E H T V F K R M M D K Y H S D R R 342
 S Q Y I K Q W D R Y A T Y L D I L R V F R T A T A 359
 S L H V R M E M N K M T K F Q K N L G F N L A H 382
 E M S I K L D L Y T V V P A N V Q M T A T I G S 399
 - - - S G V P O W T 392
 L R G N A A 408

Fig. 2. (A) DNA sequence of the *Synechocystis chlP* gene, and the deduced protein sequence. A putative ribosome binding sequence is underlined. The sequence reported in this paper has been assigned the accession number X97972. (B) Protein sequence alignment between *R. capsulatus* BchP (top) and *Synechocystis* ChlP (bottom). Alignments were performed using the Clustal V method in the Lasergene software (DNASTar).

the phytol moiety of the bchl constitutes 30% of the molecular weight of the molecule, and it also greatly influences the properties of the chlorophyll molecule as a result of the increase in hydrophobicity (lipophilicity) brought about by the attachment of GG, followed by the reduction of the alcohol side-chain. The phytol group plays a crucial role in the stability and function of pigment-protein complexes, and it is known

that the assembly process cannot be completed without the attachment of GG [22]. The crystallography carried out on the bacterial reaction centre and light-harvesting complexes has provided an abundance of structural information [23,24], so that it is possible to examine the conformation adopted by each phytol chain in atomic detail. In the case of the reaction centre, it is clear that in the 'active' branch

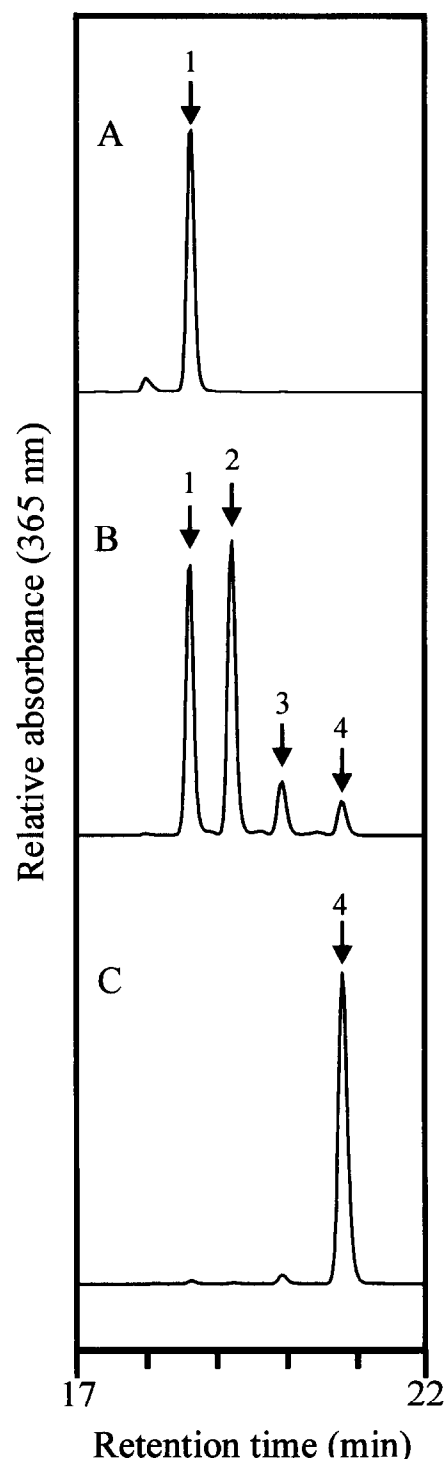


Fig. 3. HPLC traces of acetone/methanol extracts from (A) *R. sphaeroides* bchP mutant T6G5[pRKEB], (B) T6G5[pEBchlP], and (C) wild type *R. sphaeroides*. Labelled peaks are (1) bchlGG, (2) bchlDHGG, (3) bchlTHGG and (4) bchlP.

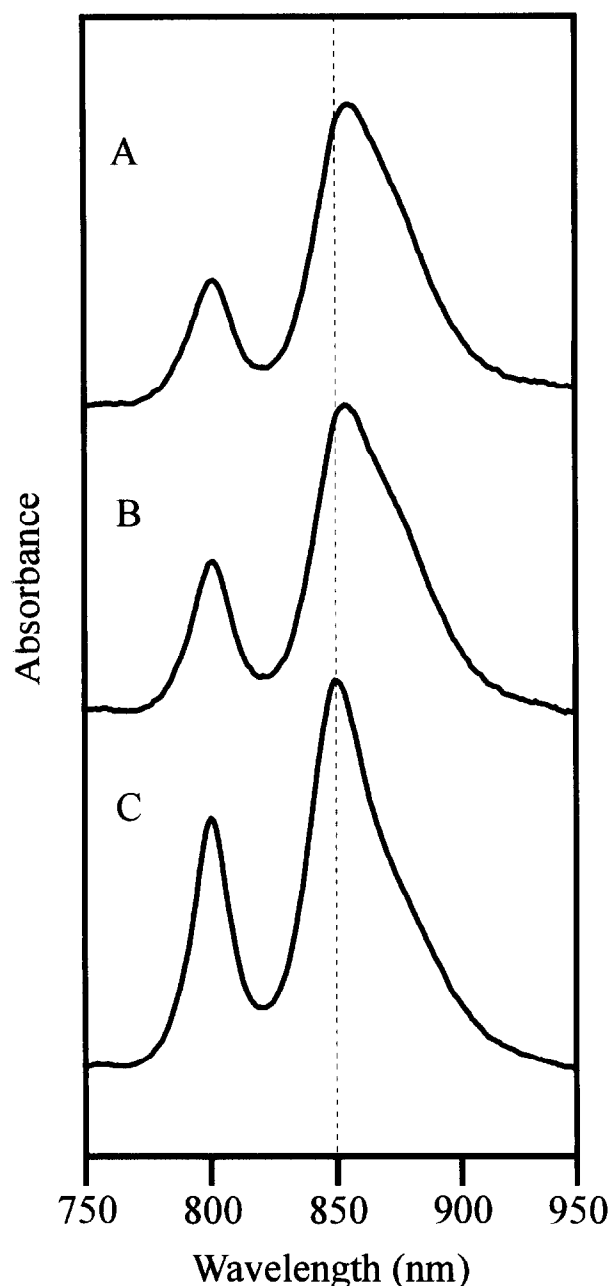


Fig. 4. Whole cell absorption spectra of (A) *R. sphaeroides* *bchP* mutant T6G5[pRKEB], (B) T6G5[pEBchlP], and (C) wild type *R. sphaeroides*.

the phytols are far more tightly packed than in the inactive branch. In LH2, it appears that the close intertwining of the phytol tails of the B800 and B850 bchls imparts a significant amount of stability to the complex. The tails also play a major role in controlling the orientation of the transition dipoles of the tetrapyrrole rings, which is crucial for fast energy transfer.

Some of the red shift seen in mutant T6G5 could arise from the enhanced contribution from the LH1 complex, which forms a shoulder on the main LH2 peak at approximately 875 nm. The separate effects of this alteration in *bchl* pigment on LH2 and LH1 have not been analysed so far. The heterologous expression of *Synechocystis* *chlP* in mutant T6G5 had a significant impact on the composition of the pigment-protein complexes: with *Synechocystis* *chlP* present, there is a

greater abundance of LH2, and the red shift of mutant T6G5 with respect to the wild type is decreased by approximately 2 nm (Fig. 4B).

3.3. Concluding remarks

We have shown that *Synechocystis* possesses an ORF displaying significant similarity at the amino acid level with the *bchP* locus of *R. capsulatus*, which is known to catalyse the terminal hydrogenation steps of *bchl* biosynthesis [2]. We have further demonstrated that this ORF, which we have termed *chlP*, is capable of at least partially complementing a *bchP* mutant of *R. sphaeroides*. This mutant normally only accumulates *bchl*aGG. Upon heterologous expression of *chlP* the partially hydrogenated intermediate, *bchl*aDHGG, was detected in abundance, as well as small but significant quantities of *bchl*aTHGG and phytylated pigment. A shift towards normality is also demonstrated by whole cell absorption spectra. We conclude, therefore, that *chlP* encodes a hydrogenase enzyme which, in its native environment, is responsible for catalysing the terminal hydrogenation stage of *chl*a biosynthesis, and that this stage may proceed in the same manner, via two partially hydrogenated intermediates, as that of *bchl*a biosynthesis. This, therefore, constitutes a functional assignment of the *chlP* gene of *Synechocystis*.

A three-step hydrogenation mechanism has been previously proposed, principally on the basis of kinetic evidence, for the terminal stages of both *chl*a and *chl*b biosynthesis in higher plants [3–5] (see Fig. 1B). However, the enzyme activity of oat seedlings thought to be responsible for the esterification of chlorophyllide *a*, termed chlorophyll synthetase, has been shown to accept PPP as a substrate in vitro [9]. Furthermore, an enzyme catalysing the conversion of free GGPP to PPP is present in chloroplasts [6]. It is possible, therefore, that the *Synechocystis* enzyme cloned in this study is involved in the hydrogenation of free GGPP, rather than that already incorporated in a *chl* molecule. It is interesting to note that the *bchl* precursor, bacteriochlorophyllide, is a very poor substrate for chlorophyll synthetase in vitro [25]. This specificity is due to the hydrogenated nature of the B ring of bacteriochlorophyllide preventing its binding to chlorophyll synthetase (see Fig. 1A). The fact that the *ChlP* enzyme does display considerable sequence homology to *BchP* of *R. capsulatus* and *R. sphaeroides* (H.A. Addelee and C.N. Hunter, unpublished results), which is encoded by a gene present within the photosynthetic gene cluster amongst the other *bchl* biosynthesis genes, is strongly supportive of the view that the cyanobacterial enzyme we have identified is that which normally catalyses the hydrogenation steps in vivo, whether the hydrogenation occurs before or after esterification, or perhaps both.

Acknowledgements: H.A.A. was supported by a postgraduate studentship from the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) of the UK. L.C.D.G. was supported by a grant from the BBSRC. P.E.J. was funded by the Danish Agricultural and Veterinary Research Council (Grant No. 9400619). The authors would like to thank Grant W. Naylor for help with preparation of the figures.

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