Structural Basis for the Thermostability of Ferredoxin from the Cyanobacterium *Mastigocladus laminosus*

Alexander Fish1,2, Tsafi Danieli2, Itzhak Ohad3, Rachel Nechushtai1,2 and Oded Livnah2,3*

1The Department of Plant Sciences, The Institute of Life Sciences, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Givat Ram, Jerusalem 91904, Israel
2The Wolfson Centre for Applied Structural Biology, The Institute of Life Sciences, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Givat Ram, Jerusalem 91904, Israel
3The Department of Biological Chemistry, The Institute of Life Sciences, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Givat Ram, Jerusalem 91904, Israel

Plant-type ferredoxins (Fds) carry a single [2Fe-2S] cluster and serve as electron acceptors of photosystem I (PSI). The ferredoxin from the thermophilic cyanobacterium *Mastigocladus laminosus* displays optimal activity at 65 °C. In order to reveal the molecular factors that confer thermostability, the crystal structure of *M. laminosus* Fd (mFd) was determined to 1.25 Å resolution and subsequently analyzed in comparison with four similar plant-type mesophilic ferredoxins. The topologies of the plant-type ferredoxins are similar, yet two structural determinants were identified that may account for differences in thermostability, a salt bridge network in the C-terminal region, and the flexible L1,2 loop that increases hydrophobic accessible surface area. These conclusions were verified by three mutations, i.e. substitution of L1,2 into a rigid β-turn (DL1,2) and two point mutations (E90S and E96S) that disrupt the salt bridge network at the C-terminal region. All three mutants have shown reduced electron transfer (ET) capabilities and [2Fe-2S] stability at high temperatures in comparison to the wild-type mFd. The results have also provided new insights into the involvement of the L1,2 loop in the Fd interactions with its electron donor, the PSI complex.

© 2005 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: photosystem I; photosynthesis; thermostability; X-ray structure; ferredoxin

Introduction

Ferredoxins (Fds) are soluble iron-sulfur proteins, found in bacteria, plants, and mammalian cells, which are involved in numerous electron transfer reactions. Fds are characterized and classified by their prosthetic groups, i.e. the presence of one or two iron-sulfur clusters of the types [4Fe-4S], [3Fe-4S] or [2Fe-2S]. Fds from plants, algae, and photosynthetic bacteria, denoted as plant-type ferredoxins, have a single [2Fe-2S] cluster in which each iron atom is coordinated by four sulfur ligands including two inorganic sulfur atoms, which bridge the two iron (Fe3+) ions, and two sulfur atoms from the cysteine side-chains of the Fd. The four sulfur atoms are organized in an approximately tetrahedral arrangement around each iron atom and the three-dimensional structure in the vicinity of the iron-sulfur cluster is highly conserved in many plant-type Fds. The oxidation–reduction midpoint potential (Em) values of these Fds are typically around −0.42 eV, making the reduced form of these Fds one of the strongest soluble reducing agents known in nature. It serves as the electron donor in several essential reactions such as NADP⁺ reduction, where FNR is the active enzyme, carbon assimilation, nitrite reduction for nitrogen assimilation, sulfite reduction, glutamate synthesis and thioredoxin reduction for metabolism regulation. The reduction of plant-type Fd is directly accomplished by the photosystem I reaction center during oxygenic photosynthesis.

Fd isolated from the thermophilic cyanobacterium *Mastigocladus laminosus* (mFd), has been shown to display thermostable properties, with maximal activity at 65 °C. Although the thermostability of mFd was discovered more than 20 years ago,
its determinants remain unsolved. The factors that determine thermostability in proteins are under considerable investigation. These studies have indicated that features that strongly influence the thermostability of a protein include better or tighter atom packing, the ratio between polar surface and buried hydrophobic surface areas, and salt bridge formation. Further studies indicate that in many instances a combination of selected factors render a protein thermostable.

The primary structures of Fds are well characterized in more than 70 plants, algae and cyanobacteria. The three-dimensional crystal structures of 20 plant-type Fds have been determined to relatively high resolution and are available in the RCSB Protein Data Bank. These crystal structures are derived from ten different mesophilic organisms (having an ideal growth temperature of 20 °C to 45 °C). In addition, two Fd structures from the thermophilic cyanobacterium *Synechococcus elongatus* have been determined using nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) spectroscopy techniques. To date, however, analysis of the thermostability determining factors in these Fd structures is still inconclusive.

Here, we have identified factors that affect the thermostability of mFd by solving its crystal structure to a resolution of 1.25 Å. A detailed structural comparison of the primary and tertiary structures of the thermostophilic mFd with four highly related mesophilic Fd proteins suggested two molecular factors which cause thermostability in mFd: a salt bridge network at the C terminus of the protein, and the flexibility of the loop connecting β1 and β2 strands (L1.2). To verify these findings, three site-directed mutations were designed and their ability to accept electrons from PSI was compared to that of the wild-type (wt) mFd, as well as the thermal stability of their [2Fe-2S] clusters.

**Results**

**Structure determination of mFd**

The structure of mFd was determined by molecular replacement methods using the monomer structure of the D68K mutant of *Anabaena* sp. PCC 7120 (PDB code 17C) without the solvent molecules as the search model. The best molecular replacement solution resulted in an R-factor of 35.2% and a correlation coefficient of 77.8% at the resolution range of 10.0 Å–4.0 Å with two molecules in the asymmetric unit. The structure was initially refined using the rigid body procedure in CNS, and was then further refined using SHELX-97 at the resolution range of 20.0 Å–1.25 Å (Table 1).

The model was built and fitted into the electron density maps for 12 iterative cycles at the resolution range of 20.0 Å–1.25 Å, to the final crystallographic R-value of 19.9% and Rfree of 24.7% (Table 1). Residues Asn15, Glu19, Asp28, Ser40, Lys52, Ile54, Ser61, Ser62, Ile71, Val76, Cys87 for molecule A and Lys4, Lys16, Ser40, Ile54, Glu72, Val76, Cys87 for molecule B have multiple side-chain conformations. The final model of mFd consists of residues 1–9, 14–98 for monomer A, residues 1–97 for monomer B, as well as eight cluster atoms and 244 solvent molecules. The coordinates of mFd (PDB code 1FRK) are available from the RCSB Protein Data Bank.

The structure of mFd is characterized by a central core formed by five β-strands β1–β3, β5 and β7 and an α-helix (α1) positioned above the β-sheet (Figure 2) to form a “β-grasp” motif. The [2Fe-2S] cluster of mFd is structurally conserved and well ordered.
The [2Fe-2S] cluster is located in a solvent-exposed pocket formed by the loop connecting helix α1 with strand β3. This loop contains three of the four cysteine residues (Cys41, Cys46 and Cys49) which coordinate the two iron ions. The fourth cysteine residue (Cys79) is contributed from the loop connecting strands β5 and β6. There are two major conformational differences between the two mFd molecules (A and B) in the asymmetric unit. The first is located in the C-terminal segment (residues 94–98) and the second in the loop region connecting β1 and β2, residues 10–14 (L1,2), which is not traced in molecule A (Figure 2(a)) due to the lack of interpretable electron density map. The differences between the two mFd molecules in the L1,2 region may be attributed to crystal packing considerations.

The L1,2 loop region in molecule A has no noticeable symmetry-related molecules in its vicinity to form any stabilizing interactions. In molecule B, however, loop L1,2 forms H-bond interactions due to crystal packing. These crystal contacts sustain conformational stability in the L1,2 loop region of molecule B, yet the flexibility of L1,2 in molecule A may reflect its flexibility in solution. In this context, the average temperature factors of the L1,2 region in molecule B is higher relative to the entire monomer (22.8 A^2 and 15.6 A^2, respectively). Superposition of the two molecules (Figure 2(b)) results in a root-mean-square deviation (RMSD) of 0.46 Å (for 94 Cα pairs) and 0.298 Å (for 88 Cα pairs, removing residues 10–14 and 94–98).

**Structural comparison of mFd with selected mesophilic Fds**

The structure of mFd was compared to four selected plant-type Fd molecules based on high sequence identity. Three Fd structures originated from mesophilic cyanobacteria *Anabaena* sp. PCC 7119 (aFd) (PDB code 1QT9),26 *Spirulina platensis* (pFd) [PDB code 4FXC]24 and *Synechocystis* sp. PCC 6803 (sFd) (PDB code 1OFF) 27 (Figure 3(a) and Table 2). Fd from the higher plant *Spinacia oleracea* (oFd) (PDB code 1A70) 28 was also elected for evaluation based on its relatively high sequence identity (68%) with mFd (Figure 3(a) and Table 2). The overall folding pattern of mFd is highly similar to all available plant-type Fd structures. Structural superposition of mFd with the four selected Fd structures indicated significant differences in the conformation of the L1,2 loop (Figure 3(b)). Sequence alignment also revealed some differences in the L1,2 loop region, indicating that oFd and sFd are two residues shorter than the other Fd molecules. The shorter L1,2 loop forms a β-turn in the molecules of oFd and sFd (Figure 3(a)) rather than the hairpin loop present in mFd, aFd, and pFd. The three disordered residues (Glu10, Ala11 and Glu12) in the mFd molecule A illustrate the flexibility of the L1,2 region. Moreover, the different conformations of the L1,2 region in mFd (molecule B), aFd and pFd are restrained by non-functional...
crystal contacts (for aFd and pFd the average B value of the L1,2 is similar to that of the entire molecules). Taken together, these observations indicate that the L1,2 loop regions in the three latter ferredoxins are most likely flexible in solution.

**Analysis of molecular factors conferring thermal stability to mFd**

Based on the structurally derived data, the factors known to affect thermostability in proteins were analyzed for mFd, in comparison to the four selected mesophilic Fds (Table 3). There are no significant differences in the number of H-bond interactions among the five Fds analyzed. However, the numbers and volumes of internal cavities differ. For instance, the volume of the oFd cavity is much smaller than that of the other Fd molecules (Table 3). Nevertheless, the other parameters that indicate packing quality, such as packing density and surface-to-volume ratio, are similar for all Fd proteins analyzed. Although there is no significant difference in hydrophobic and hydrophilic accessible surface areas (ASA), the ratio of hydrophobic
to total ASA is slightly higher for mFd and aFd in comparison to other Fds. Analysis of salt bridge interactions among the different Fds resulted in five possible salt bridges in mFd as compared to three, two and four in the cyanobacterial aFd, pFd and sFd, respectively (Tables 3 and 4). The higher plant mesophilic oFd, however, contains six salt bridge interactions. Among all Fds analyzed, only a single salt bridge interaction between Arg42 and Glu31 of M. laminosus Fd. The structure superposition was performed with the program O.27

In addition, there are salt bridge networks in mFd, sFd, and oFd as indicated in Figure 4. In mFd, Lys93 forms a two-salt bridge network with Glu90 and Glu96 (Figure 4, center). In sFd, Glu89 forms a salt bridge network with Lys51 and Lys92 (Figure 4, right). oFd contains a more intricate salt bridge network, which involves Glu88 and Lys91 (Figure 4, left). In aFd, however, Lys93 forms only a single salt bridge interaction with Glu10, and in pFd there are no salt bridge interactions in the C-terminal region (Table 4).

### Analysis of the thermal stability of the [2Fe-2S] cluster and the ET activity of mFd wt and mutants

Based on our structural analysis, we elected to mutate mFd in order to verify whether our assumptions of the molecular factors that confer thermostability to mFd are correct. We focused on the L1,2 loop and the salt bridge network in the C-terminal region of mFd that displayed differences between thermolabile mFd and the four mesophilic Fds. In the first mutant, ΔL1,2, the flexible L1,2 loop in mFd (residues 10–14) was replaced with the rigid β-turn of spinach Fd (residues 10–12). The other two point mutations, E90S and E96S, were designed to disrupt the salt bridge network at the C terminus of mFd.

The absorption values for wt mFd and the three designed mutants were measured at 280 nm and 423 nm, at increasing temperatures. The three mutants display a decrease in the 423 nm absorption at a lower temperature in comparison to the wt mFd (Figure 5), indicating a dissociation of the [2Fe-2S] cluster from the protein. A ~10 deg. C decrease in [2Fe-2S] stability is seen in the two point mutations, E90S and E96S, in which fewer salt bridge interactions occur. The ΔL1,2 substitution of the L1,2 loop by a β-turn has a relatively smaller effect (~5 deg. C) on [2Fe-2S] thermal stability (Figure 5). A temperature-dependent CD analysis of

### Table 2. Structural comparison between M. laminosus Fd and the selected Fds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Molecule</th>
<th>Resolution (Å)</th>
<th>Number of residues</th>
<th>Sequence identity (%)</th>
<th>RMSDb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mFd</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aFd</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pFd</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>0.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sFd</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oFd</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a The comparison was made by superposing the known crystal structures of the following ferredoxins onto the molecule B of M. laminosus ferredoxin: Anabaena sp. PCC 7119 ferredoxin–(aFd),26 Spirulina platensis ferredoxin–(pFd),25 Synechocystis sp. PCC 6803 ferredoxin–(sFd)27 and S. oleracea ferredoxin–(oFd).28

b Root-mean-square deviation (RMSD) from the superposition of Cα atoms homologous to residues 2–9 and 15–93 of M. laminosus Fd. The structure superposition was performed with the program O.27

### Table 3. Structural statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>mFd</th>
<th>aFd</th>
<th>pFd</th>
<th>sFd</th>
<th>oFd</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of H-bonds</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of MM H-bonds</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of MS H-bonds</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of SS H-bonds</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of cavities</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume of cavities (Å³)</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Packing density</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surface-to-volume ratio</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total ASA (Å²)</td>
<td>5127</td>
<td>5115</td>
<td>5150</td>
<td>4816</td>
<td>5149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charged ASA (Å²)</td>
<td>1435</td>
<td>1507</td>
<td>1507</td>
<td>1410</td>
<td>1459</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polar ASA (Å²)</td>
<td>1705</td>
<td>1579</td>
<td>1790</td>
<td>1698</td>
<td>1789</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hydrophobic ASA (Å²)</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>2029</td>
<td>1853</td>
<td>1708</td>
<td>1901</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hydrophobic ASA/total ASA (%)</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a In all calculations, water molecules and hetero-atoms were excluded from the coordinate files.

b Data shown for molecule B of M. laminosus ferredoxin (mFd), Anabaena sp. PCC 7119 ferredoxin–(aFd),26 Spirulina platensis ferredoxin–(pFd),25 Synechocystis sp. PCC 6803 ferredoxin–(sFd)27 and S. oleracea ferredoxin–(oFd).28

c Number of hydrogen bonds were calculated using the HBPlus routine53 with default parameters for distances and angles. The hydrogen bonds were divided into three classes: main-chain–main-chain (MM H-bonds), main-chain–side-chain (MS H-bonds), and side-chain–side-chain (SS H-bonds).

d The program GRASP (version 1.3) was used to provide cavity information and to calculate total and hydrophobic accessible surface areas (ASA). The probe radius used was 1.4 Å and the surface resolution parameter was three points Å⁻1. The charged/polar/hydrophobic ASAs were calculated based on individual chemical groups.

* Ratio of the van der Waals volume to volume enclosed by molecular surface.

f A salt bridge was inferred when Asp or Glu side-chain carboxyl oxygen atoms were found to be within 4.0 Å from the nitrogen atoms of Arg, Lys, or His side-chains.16,55 A group of residues was defined as a salt bridge network if salt bridges connected them.
the wt and two mutant Fds is in accord with the cluster stability assay (data not shown).

In addition, the ET from *M. laminosus* PSI to wt and the three mFd mutants was assayed and analyzed. The initial light-induced oxidation rate of *M. laminosus* PSI primary donor, P700, by the wt and different mFd mutants was monitored using the PAM-101 system at two temperatures of 23°C and 55°C (Table 5). The PSI photo-oxidation rate without mFd as an electron acceptor was used as a reference. At a temperature of 23°C the wt and all three mutants did not show any significant differences in PSI oxidation. At the higher temperature of 55°C, the DL1,2 mutant showed an extremely low ET capability, indicating that the mutant was unable to photo-oxidize PSI in light, whereas the E90S and E96S mutants displayed merely 14% and 30% ET of the wt activity (Table 5).

### Discussion

Previous studies have indicated that several factors may confer thermostable properties to a protein, often in concert.12,14 This is supported by the factors found to confer thermostability to mFd in this study. Structural analysis of mFd revealed that its overall fold is similar to other plant-type mesophilic Fd structures. No significant differences were identified in the total number of hydrogen bond interactions or the packing density between mFd and four selected highly homologous structures of mesophilic Fds (Table 3). The most notable difference between mFd and the similar mesophilic homologues, aFd and pFd, is the presence of a salt bridge network in the C-terminal region of mFd (Figures 3 and 4; Table 4). A high number of salt bridge interactions is proposed to be one of the crucial factors that determine thermostability in proteins.30,31 Furthermore, salt bridge networks are known to be energetically more favorable than an equivalent number of individual salt bridge interactions.13,32 We thus conclude that the thermostability of mFd results, in part, from its salt bridge network at the C-terminal region. Conversely, aFd and pFd lack such a salt bridge network (Table 4) and although sFd and oFd exhibit a similar salt bridge network in their C-terminal region as mFd, they are mesophilic (Figure 4 and Table 6). This shows that additional molecular factor(s), other than salt bridge networks, must account for differences in the thermostability between mFd and the mesophilic sFd and oFd. The primary and tertiary structures of mFd, sFd, and oFd (Figure 3) revealed notable differences in the L1,2 loop region. In mFd, the L1,2 loop is located above the inner core of the protein, which is highly hydrophobic (Figure 2). The difference in the conformations of the L1,2 region in mFd, aFd and pFd, despite the high sequence identity in this region (Figure 3(a) and (b)), indicate that indeed this loop displays a substantial degree of flexibility and could increase the accessibility of the core to solvent.
assumption is further supported by the disorder of L1,2 in molecule A of mFd. The sFd and oFd structures differ from mFd in the size and conformation of the L1,2 loop. In sFd and oFd L1,2 is two residues shorter than in mFd, aFd and pFd (Figure 3), and forms a rigid $\beta$-turn which blocks solvent access to the hydrophobic core of the protein. The increase of the hydrophobic ASA of a protein is a well-recognized thermostability determining factor. It is possible that the flexibility in the L1,2 region alters the ASA in mFd due to increased motion at higher temperatures which exposes its hydrophobic core. This may contribute to the thermostable properties of the protein relative to sFd and oFd, which contain a rigid $\beta$-turn. The concept that shorter or more rigid loops increase protein thermostability is not reflected in the case of mFd (Tables 3 and 6).

In order to analyze the individual factors that render mFd thermostable, three mutations were designed ($\Delta$L1,2, E90S, and E96S). The thermostability of these mutants vis-à-vis the wt mFd, was assayed by monitoring the irreversible dissociation of the [2Fe-2S] cluster as a function of increased temperature (Figure 5). In addition, the ET activities of the mutated mFds were compared to that of the wt mFd (Table 5). The [2Fe-2S] cluster was less stable as a function of temperature in all three mutants in comparison to wt mFd (Figure 5). In the E90S and E96S mutants, the salt bridge networks near the C-terminal region are probably, at least, partially disrupted (Figure 4) and are in closer proximity to the [2Fe-2S] cluster in comparison to the distal L1,2 loop region. Indeed, these two mutants displayed similar [2Fe-2S] dissociation properties at temperatures approximately 10 deg. C lower than the cluster in the wt mFd (Figure 5). The loop replacement by a $\beta$-turn ($\Delta$L1,2), however, caused a smaller (~5 deg. C) decrease in the thermal stability of its cluster relative to the wt protein (Figure 5). ET activities of the three mutants indicate that the E96S mutant exhibits higher PSI photo-oxidation activity at 55 °C than the E90S mutant. To a large extent, these reduced ET activities were expected in both mutants with regard to the dissociation of the [2Fe-2S] clusters at higher temperatures (Figure 5). Conversely, the result indicating that $\Delta$L1,2 did not have

![Figure 5. The thermal stability of the [2Fe-2S] cluster of mFd. Spectroscopic measurement of M. laminosus mFd and its three mutants ($\Delta$L1,2, E90S, E96S) were measured in order to follow proper assembly of the their [2Fe-2S] clusters. The absorption at 280 nm and 423 nm was measured during continuous heating (1 deg. C/minute) of 200 µl samples containing wild-type (wt) M. laminosus ferredoxin (squares) and three of its mutants: $\Delta$L1,2 (circles), E90S (triangles) and E96S (stars) at 50 µM. The drop in the ratio of 423 nm to 280 nm absorptions indicates the dissociation of the [2Fe-2S] cluster.](image)

| Table 5. Photo-oxidation rate of photosystem I primary donor–P700 ($\Delta$$\Delta$A$\lambda$200 nm/s) by wt and mutants of mFd as a function of temperature |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Temperature (°C) | wt              | $\Delta$L1,2    | E90S           | E96S           |
| 23              | 53.3±7.0        | 48.9±5.0        | 39.8±5.6       | 44.7±5.7       |
| 55              | 72.7±17.7       | 4.5±8.3         | 10.4±8.6       | 22.5±9.3       |

The initial rate of the light-induced oxidation of photosystem I isolated from M. laminosus$^{37}$ in the presence of wild-type M. laminosus ferredoxin, or its mutants, was measured using the PAM-101 system.$^{29}$ The data are expressed in relative units s$^{-1}$, after subtracting the initial light-induced oxidation rate of photosystem I at each temperature in the absence of ferredoxin.

<p>| Table 6. Analyzed structural elements affecting protein thermostability |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Molecule</th>
<th>C-terminal salt bridge network</th>
<th>Flexibility of L1,2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mFd</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aFd</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pFd</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sFd</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oFd</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The structure featuring the property is indicated by (+), otherwise indicated by (−). Data are shown for molecule B of M. laminosus ferredoxin (mFd), Anabaena sp. PCC 7119 ferredoxin–(aFd),$^{26}$ S. platensis ferredoxin–(pFd),$^{24}$ Synechocystis sp. PCC 6803 ferredoxin–(sFd)$^{27}$ and S. oleracea ferredoxin–(oFd).$^{28}$
ET activity at high temperatures was astonishing (Table 5); the thermal stability of the [2Fe-2S] cluster was higher relative to that of E90S and E96S, probably due to the distance of the L1,2 loop from the cluster. Surprisingly, the initial PSI photo-oxidation rate of ΔL1,2 was dramatically smaller at 55 °C in the ET assay (Table 5). These findings indicate that the E90S, E96S, and ΔL1,2 mutants behave differently with respect to their [2Fe-2S] stability and ET activities. This discrepancy may be attributed to differences in the association of the mutants with PSI. During photo-oxidation, the mFd binds PSI, accepts electrons and then dissociates from it. PSI binding may be involved in conformational changes of mFd that permit correct association and subsequent electron transfer. One may assume that at elevated temperatures the rigidity of the L1,2 β-turn of the ΔL1,2 mutant does not permit the conformational changes required for optimal association. This is despite the fact that at high temperatures (55 °C) the [2Fe-2S] cluster of ΔL1,2 displays higher stability than the clusters in the E90S, and E96S mutations, making it more capable of functioning in ET. These findings provide new insights into the interactions between PSI and Fd. In recent years, large efforts have been directed towards understanding the dynamics and interactions of Fd and the PSI reducing site subunits.  

Analysis of the amino acids in Fd indicated the residues at the C terminus region of the Fd in the cluster of acidic residues (amino acid residues 92–95) as significant for PSI binding. Here, for the first time, we show the involvement of mFd N-terminal amino acid residues (10–14). In summary, structural analysis combined with functional assays presented here have provided two major innovative findings: the molecular factors that confer thermostability to mFd and new insights into the interactions of Fd with its electron donor, PSI. The results indicate that a combination of two factors, the salt bridge network and the flexibility of the L1,2 loop, render mFd thermostable where each factor taken individually is not sufficient to confer thermostability (Table 6). As in many other systems mFd thermostability is determined by a combination of small, subtle changes that are specific to the individual protein.  

Materials and Methods  

Crystallization, data collection, structure determination and refinement of mFd  

mFd was isolated from M. laminosus cells, purified and crystallized by the vapor-diffusion, hanging-drop method as reported.  

The mFd crystals belong to the orthorhombic space group P212121 with cell parameters a = 28.5 Å, b = 53.5 Å, c = 111.7 Å with two mFd molecules in the asymmetric unit.  

Diffraction data to the resolution of 1.25 Å were collected at 100 K on a ADSC Quantum 4R CCD detector with an oscillation range of 0.5° and radiation wavelength of 0.933 Å at the European Synchrotron Radiation Facility (ESRF), Grenoble, France (beam line ID14-1). Data were integrated and scaled using the HKL suite.  

The mFd structure was solved via molecular replacement methods, using AMoRe implemented in the CCP4 suite using PDB code 1J7C as the search model. The space group was determined and verified via molecular replacement translation search. The structure was refined initially using the rigid body refinement procedure in CNS at the resolution range of 2.0 Å–4.0 Å and was further refined using SHELX-97. At each step the model was checked and fitted manually into the electron density maps using the graphic program O.  

mFd mutant cDNA constructs  

All mFd mutants were prepared using standard PCR mutagenesis methods based on the wild-type mFd gene, cloned in pET20b (Novagen) ferredoxin. The E96S mutant was prepared by two oligonucleotide primers; the forward primer GGAGATATACATATGGCAACCTA TAA containing the Ndel restriction site and the reverse primer GCTGTTGCTCGACGTAGTAAACCCGATTTTC containing the E96S mutation followed by the Xhol restriction site. The primers were used to amplify the E96S mutated gene that was subsequently cloned into the Ndel and Xhol sites in the pET20b vector. The ΔL1,2 replacement was done in a similar way, where the forward primer CATAGTTAACAGTATACCTC containing an AccI restriction site, and the reverse primer GCTCAATTTTTTGTACCTGTAACCTTGACGCTGCTTTAACCTATTAGTTTC containing the ΔL1,2 mutation and Mfel restriction site. The primers were used to amplify the ΔL1,2 mutated gene that was restricted and sub-cloned into the pET20b ferredoxin between the AccI and Mfel restriction sites in the gene. 

The E90S mutant was prepared according to the PCR overlap extension method using two internal primers; the internal forward GCGCATCTCAACACACACAAA GAAGAGAGCTTTAC and the internal reverse CTTCTCTTTTTGTGGTGTAGTGACGTACCGCAA, both containing the E90S mutation region, and two external primers, the forward primer from the E90S mutant, containing the Ndel restriction site, and a reverse primer GCCCACTACGTGACCCATCACC containing the BanII site. After producing the fused mutated gene, the PCR product was cloned back into the pET20b ferredoxin construct using Ndel and BanII restriction sites, replacing the region between the pET20b ferredoxin construct. All oligonucleotide primers were obtained from MWG Biotech. All mutants were verified by DNA sequencing and were expressed and purified using the protocol described in our previous work. 

Molecular masses of the three mFd mutants were verified by mass spectrometric measurements.  

Measurements of the thermal stability of the mFd [2Fe-2S] cluster and ET from PSI  

The thermal stability of the [2Fe-2S] cluster of the wt and mutated mFds was determined by UV–VIS spectroscopic measurements. The characteristic absorbance of [2Fe-2S] at 423 nm was normalized to the absorbance of the protein moiety measured at 280 nm. Absorption measurements at wavelengths of 280 nm and 423 nm.
were performed on a Cary 300 spectrophotometer (Varian Inc.). The measurements were conducted with continuous incremental heating of 1 deg. C/minute. Each sample contained a concentration of 50 µM protein in a volume of 200 µl.

The mFds ET activities were determined by measuring the initial photo-oxidation rate of PSI. The assay of PSI photo-oxidation was conducted by measuring the light induced absorption changes of the PSI primary donor, P700, at 820 nm. The measurements were performed with the PSI attachment of the Pulse Amplitude Modulated fluorimeter (PAM-101, Walz, Germany). The 0.4 ml samples of 0.2 µM PSI from M. laminosus, 10 mM Mfd and 10 mM ascorbic acid in solution, containing 10 mM Tricine–HCl buffer (pH 8.0), 5 mM MgCl2 and 0.03% n-dodecyl-β-D-maltoside, were exposed to saturating light (5000 µmol photons m⁻² s⁻¹) for a duration of three seconds at different temperatures and the initial rate (absorbance changes in relative units)/second were calculated.

Acknowledgements

This work has been supported, in part, by the Israeli Science Foundation. We thank Dr. D. E. Shalev from the NMR facility, and Dr M. Lebendiker from the Protein Purification Division of the Wolfson Centre for Applied Structural Biology for their advice and support, and the ESRF staff for their assistance during data collection. We thank Dr L. Shimon and Mrs M. Berman for their suggestions and assistance.

References


