Iron Oxidation and Deposition in the Biofilm Covering Montacuta ferruginosa (Mollusca, Bivalvia)

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*The shell of the bivalve Montacuta ferruginosa is covered with a rust-colored biofilm. This biofilm includes filamentous bacteria and protozoa encrusted with a mineral, rich in ferric ion and phosphate. The aim of this research was to study two possible microbial iron precipitation pathways in the biofilm, namely, microbial iron oxidation and microbial degradation of organic Fe(III) complexes. The iron-oxidizing activity was assayed spectrophotometrically by monitoring the formation of the dye Wurster blue in*

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biofilm extracts. Iron-oxidizing activity was effectively detected in extracts obtained by oxalic acid treatment of biofilm fragments. Extracts obtained without oxalic acid treatment, heated extracts, or extracts supplemented with HgCl₂ did not show any activity. This suggests that an iron-oxidizing factor (IOF), possibly an enzyme, coprecipitated with the mineral. Additional information gathered by using sodium dodecyl sulfate–polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis, gel-filtration chromatography, and UV spectrophotometry indicate that the IOF would be a small peptide or glycopeptide (1,350 Da). Microbial degradation of organic Fe(III) complexes was assayed with biofilm fragments incubated in a medium containing ferric citrate. Analysis of the supernatants after various intervals revealed that the complex was degraded by living microorganisms much faster than in the heat-killed negative controls. We conclude that ferric iron precipitation in the biofilm may proceed by way of microbial Fe(II) oxidation as well as microbial degradation of organic Fe(III) complexes.

Keywords  bacteria, biofilm, bivalve, Fe(III), iron, oxidation

Intimate associations of microorganisms with Fe(III) mineral deposits are widespread in nature (Ghirose 1984; Ehrlich 1990; Tazaki et al. 1997). In marine environments, such associations occur in marine snow (Cowen and Silver 1984; Heldal et al. 1996), in ferromanganese concretions (Burnett and Nealson 1981), at deep-sea hydrothermal vents (Karl et al. 1989; Juniper and Tebo 1995), and as epibiotic biofilms on marine animals (Jannasch and Wirsen 1981; Baross and Deming 1985; Gillan and De Ridder 1997). Although the fine structure of most of these communities has been elucidated, very little is known about the role of microorganisms in Fe(III) deposition processes. In oxygenated seawater, Fe(III) is highly insoluble (Wells et al. 1995) and Fe(II) oxidation is spontaneous (Roekens and Van Grieken 1983). As a consequence, biological Fe(III) deposition is hard to differentiate from nonbiological spontaneous Fe(III) deposition. Investigators have frequently proposed that seawater microorganisms simply adsorb colloidal Fe oxyhydroxides in their exopolymeric substances (EPS) or passively accumulate the Fe ions resolubilized within microenvironments (Cowen and Silver 1984). In contrast to freshwater environments, microbial (enzymatic) Fe(II) oxidation in seawater environments is not a well-studied process. Only recently was the occurrence of such a process demonstrated in anaerobic cultures of marine phototrophic bacteria (Ehrenreich and Widdel 1994) and in anaerobic cultures of marine nitrate-reducing bacteria (Straub et al. 1996). To our best knowledge, that process remains undemonstrated at marine anoxic–oxic transition zones using O₂ as electron acceptor. Nevertheless, microbial Fe(II) oxidation at transition zones, as for the bacterium Gallionella ferruginea (Hanert 1989), could be widespread in marine sediment burrows and other microenvironments where water is slowly moving from oxic to anoxic zones.

Montacuta ferruginosa is a marine bivalve living inside the burrow of the echnoid Echinocardium cordatum (Gage 1966). A typical rust-colored coating covers the shell of the bivalve, and the species epithet refers to this coating. The coating is a partially mineralized biofilm (amorphous ferric minerals rich in phosphate) featuring filamentous bacteria that resemble members of the Beggiatoales and ciliates of the suctorial group (Gillan and De Ridder 1995, 1997). The phylogenetic diversity of the biofilm cubacteria was determined by denaturing gradient gel electrophoresis of polymerase chain reaction–amplified gene fragments coding for 16S rRNA, as well as by cloning and sequencing the 16S rRNA genes (Gillan et al. 1998). These molecular analyses revealed a diverse consortium, finding close relatives of Pseudalteromonas, Colwellia, Oceanospirillum, and Flexibacter maritimus in the biofilm. Traditional cultivation methods were also used to study the biofilm. Among others, the heterotrophic strains obtained were tentatively classified in the genera Cytophaga, Flexibacter, and Leucothrix (Gillan and De Ridder, unpublished).

The aim of the present research was to look for two active processes of Fe(III) deposition in the biofilm: microbial Fe(II) oxidation and microbial degradation of Fe(III) organic
complexes. The burrow where *M. ferruginosa* is living is a good place to look for these processes because it is an oxic–anoxic transition zone that appears to be very rich in Fe(II) and organic matter (Gillan and De Ridder 1995). As explained in the discussion, the study of living Fe(III) microbial communities can give important information to sedimentologists studying ancient Fe(III) microbial ecosystems.

**Materials and Methods**

**Samples**

Specimens of *M. ferruginosa* (Montagu) were collected intertidally from the burrows of *E. cordatum* (Pennant) (Echinoidea, Spatangoida) at Wimereux (Pas-de-Calais, France) during 1995, 1996, 1997, and 1999. Bivalves were briefly rinsed in sterile artificial seawater (SASW; Sigma) before use in iron oxidation assays or iron deposition assays.

**Assay for Iron Oxidation**

Biofilms were scraped off 12 to 50 bivalve shells and suspended in SASW. The biofilms were then centrifuged and resuspended in 3 ml of oxalic acid (0.2 M, pH 3.0) to dissolve the iron precipitates. Some biofilms were resuspended in 3 ml of SASW only and not treated with oxalic acid. The suspensions were placed on ice, sonicated (3 × 15 s) at about 120 μm of amplitude (setting 4 of the output control, on a VibraCell 375 ultrasonic processor fitted with a 5-mm microtip), incubated 20 min at 4°C, and again sonicated. The suspensions were then centrifuged 15 min at 10,000 g (at 4°C), and 2.5 ml of the supernatant was desalted on Sephadex G-25 columns (PD-10; Pharmacia) equilibrated with MilliQ water as follows: After the sample had run through the column, 0.5 ml of water was added; then the high-molecular-mass components were eluted with 2.5 ml of MilliQ water. This treatment removed iron and oxalic acid from extracts. Negative controls consisted of 3 ml of oxalic acid without biofilm fragments, or 3 ml of oxalic acid plus 5 mg of oxidized iron powder (Fe₂O₃ pro analysis). Controls were also sonicated and desalted.

The iron-oxidizing activity of the extracts was then tested by the method described in De Vrind-de Jong et al. (1990) for detection of Fe(III) formation. To 395 μl of extracts placed in a spectrophotometer cuvette is added 5 μl of 10 mM potassium ferrocyanide [source of Fe(II)], 50 μl of 10 mM 2-(N-morpholino)ethanesulfonic acid (MES buffer), pH 6.0, and 50 μl of 2 mM fresh (N,N,N',N'-tetramethyl-p-phenylenediamine (TMPD). TMPD is oxidized in Wurster blue (oxidized TMPD generated in the extract) by the Fe(III) ions generated during Fe(II) oxidation. The formation of Wurster blue in the cuvette is monitored by recording the increase in absorbance at 620 nm with a double-beam spectrophotometer for 3 min (cuvettes are placed in the spectrophotometer immediately after the addition of reagents). The blank cuvette contained MES and TMPD but not Fe (to show that any increase in absorbance depends on the presence of Fe and is not caused by other TMPD-oxidizing compounds). To denature any iron-oxidizing proteins, some extracts were heated 10 min at 100°C before the addition of Fe, MES, and TMPD. The enzymatic inhibitors HgCl₂ and KCN (5 μl of different concentrations) were also added to some cuvettes before the other reagents were added.

**Characterization of the Iron-Oxidizing Factor**

Extracts of biofilms were prepared and desalted as for the iron-oxidation assays. Protein contents were determined by the assay of Bradford (Bradford 1976), with bovine serum albumin as a standard. Sugar contents were determined by the assay of Dubois et al. (1956), with D-glucose as a standard.
For spectrophotometry, absorption spectra of extracts were recorded from 200 to 800 nm on a Philips PU 8700 spectrophotometer in Hellma Quartz Suprasil cuvettes.

For sodium dodecyl sulfate–polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (SDS-PAGE), extracts were lyophilized and dissolved in Laemmli sample buffer (Laemmli 1970), and the SDS-PAGE was conducted by the method of Laemmli (1970). Gels were stained for proteins with Coomassie brilliant blue R250. For iron-oxidizing activity, gels were rinsed in MES buffer and incubated in (NH₄)₂Fe(SO₄)₂, as described by Corstjens et al. (1992). Some gels were silver-stained.

For gel-filtration chromatography, extracts were lyophilized and dissolved in 500 μl of MES-NaCl (10 mM MES, pH 6.0, 0.02 M NaCl) with 1% saccharose. Samples were then deposited on Econo-Columns (1.5 × 30 cm; Bio-Rad) packed with Sephadex G-200 and eluted with MES-NaCl at a flow rate of 2.3 ml/h/cm² (controlled with a Minipuls-2 peristaltic pump) at 4°C. The bed volume was 47.1 ml. Columns were connected to a UV detector set at 280 nm (Gilion 115). The UV detector was connected to a chart recorder (a Macintosh running chart v3.2.8) through a MacLab/2e interface. Fractions of 600 μl were collected with a fraction collector (Gilion FC 204), and the iron-oxidizing activity of each fraction was determined as described above. Nonlyophilized extracts were also deposited on Sephadex G-25 columns (PD-10). Here, the sample volume was set to 250 μl, the eluent was MilliQ water, and gravity was used to pump the eluent to the UV detector. To determine the molecular mass of the iron-oxidizing factor, a calibration curve was constructed with a calibration kit (HMW kit; Pharmacia).

Assay for Microbial Degradation of Organic Fe(III) Complexes

Biofilms were scraped off 40 bivalve shells and suspended in SASW. The suspension was divided among 12 sterile 3-cm-diameter tubes. The samples were centrifuged and the biofilm fragments in each tube were resuspended in 9 ml of SASW. Six of the tubes (control tubes) were heated 15 min at 100°C to kill the bacteria. One milliliter of filtered Fe(III) citrate (0.2-μm-pore filtration), 10 mM in SASW, was then added to each tube. For three experimental and three control tubes, the pH of their contents was adjusted to 6.5 with concentrated NaOH; in the remaining tubes the pH was adjusted to 8.2. All samples were aerated on a gyratory shaker at 20°C and 140 rpm. At timed intervals, the tubes were centrifuged for 5 min at 160g, and 300-μl portions of the supernatant were pipetted into Eppendorf tubes. The iron in these fractions was analyzed by atomic absorption spectrometry (GBC 906 AAS) after acid digestion of the samples (HNO₃ 65%, Suprapur; Merck) for 48 h. Each sample was treated in triplicate. The reproducibility of the method was checked by using an internal standard (FeNO₃).

Results

Iron Oxidation Assay

The iron oxidation assay was performed in April 1995 (30 biofilms), May 1995 (15 biofilms), October 1995 (50 biofilms), February 1996 (40 biofilms), March 1996 (25 biofilms), April 1996 (25 biofilms), and February 1999 (12 biofilms). All extracts of biofilm were tested at least three times. All extracts tested showed an iron oxidation activity. The rate of iron oxidation varied from 0.060 ΔA/min to 0.094 ΔA/min (Figure 1). There was no iron oxidation in the negative controls, in extracts supplemented with 1 mM HgCl₂, or in extracts prepared without the oxalic acid treatment (a rate <0.005 ΔA/min was considered negative). The iron oxidation activity was not inhibited by 0.1 mM HgCl₂ or 0.1 mM KCN. In extracts previously heated to 100°C for 10 min, the rate of iron oxidation was reduced to zero.
**FIGURE 1** Rate of iron oxidation in biofilm extracts after addition of Fe(II), TMPD, and MES buffer at time zero. (A, B) Two extracts of biofilm; (C) negative control (heated extract). Iron oxidation in extracts was measured by recording the increase in the absorbance (Abs) at 620 nm in a spectrophotometer. This increase occurs as the dye Wurster blue is formed from TMPD by Fe(III) generated in the extract.

**Characterization of the Iron-Oxidizing Factor (IOF)**

The absorption spectrum of a desalted biofilm extract is shown in Figure 2. The absorption was very strong in the ultraviolet region of the spectrum, from 200 nm to about 400 nm. Negative controls absorbed less UV light and only from 200 nm to ~230 nm (Figure 2). No proteins were detected in desalted extracts by the Bradford assay. Sugars were detected

**FIGURE 2** Absorption spectrum of a desalted (Sephadex G-25) biofilm extract (a) and a desalted negative control (b). The biofilm extract was prepared with biofilms suspended in oxalic acid; before desalting, the suspension was sonicated and then centrifuged. The negative control consisted of oxalic acid and 5 mg of Fe₃O₅.
FIGURE 3 SDS-PAGE of biofilm extracts. Lane a, molecular mass markers; lanes b and c, biofilm extracts; lane d, negative control (oxalic acid and Fe$_2$O$_3$). For lanes a and b the gel was stained for proteins with Coomassie brilliant blue R250. For lanes c and d the gel was stained for iron-oxidizing activity; after electrophoresis, gels were rinsed in MES buffer and incubated in (NH$_4$)$_2$Fe(SO$_4$)$_2$. The arrow shows the band of precipitated iron oxide corresponding to the IOF (see text for more details).

at 15 to 20 µg/ml by the Dubois assay. After separation of the extracts with SDS-PAGE and coloration with Coomassie brilliant blue, no bands, apart from the migration front, could be detected (Figure 3, lane b). On gels incubated in the presence of Fe(II), a band of precipitated iron oxide formed at the migration front for biofilm extracts only (lane c, arrow); this band was absent from the control lanes (lane d). These results suggest that the IOF was a small protein with an apparent molecular mass of <29 kDa. No bands could be detected on silver-stained gels because a smear was produced. Chromatographic studies showed the IOF to be a small molecule of ~1,350 Da because it eluted at the same time as 1,356 Da cyanocobalamin on the chromatographic media used.

Assay for Microbial Degradation of Organic Fe(III) Complexes

At different intervals, the amount of iron in supernatants was monitored by atomic absorption spectrometry. For the samples adjusted at pH 6.5, the amount of iron in the supernatant fluid decreased with time much more quickly than in the control samples (Figure 4). After 120 h of incubation, only 5% of the starting iron content was detected in the supernatants of the treated samples, whereas the control samples still contained 90% of their iron. For the samples adjusted at pH 8.2, the levels of iron decreased quickly and similarly for the experimental and control tubes, and only 8% of iron remained in supernatants after only 48 h of incubation (data not shown).

Discussion

We concluded from our Fe(II) oxidation assays that an extracellular IOF was coprecipitated with Fe(III) minerals in the biofilm. The IOF has an apparent molecular mass of ~1,350 Da and is thus in the same molecular mass range as the pyoverdin/pseudobactin class of siderophores (1,200–1,400 Da) isolated from various bacteria (Reid and Butler
FIGURE 4 Variation of Fe concentration in control tubes (heat-killed biofilms) and experimental tubes (living biofilms) according to time (mean ± SD, n = 3). Biofilms are suspended in SASW and 1 mM Fe(III)-citrate. The pH was adjusted to 8.2. Fe concentrations were determined by atomic absorption spectrometry and are expressed as percentages of Fe remaining in the supernatant.

1991). However, siderophores are not iron-oxidizing compounds. To our knowledge, extracellular iron-oxidizing compounds from neutrophilic bacteria have been described only in the freshwater bacteria Leptothrix discophora SS-1, as 150-kDa proteins (Corstjens et al. 1992).

The molecular nature of the IOF is still uncertain. The first possibility would be that it is a small peptide. Although proteins were not detected in extracts by the assay of Bradford, an iron-oxidizing band was detected on SDS-PAGE gels, and extracts strongly absorbed UV radiation (suggesting the presence of tyrosine and tryptophan residues as well as peptide bonds). To explain the fact that the IOF was not revealed by Coomassie brilliant blue (in the Bradford assay and on SDS-PAGE gels), peptides <3 kDa do not always produce color in the presence of acidified Coomassie brilliant blue (Sedmark and Grossberg 1977). The presence of sugars in desalted extracts would be explained by the abundance of exopolymeric substances in biofilms (Cooksey and Wigglesworth-Cooksey 1995), substances that originate from sheaths and capsules of microorganisms. The other possibility would be that the IOF is a glycopeptide and that high absorbance in the UV is caused by carboxyls of the glycan part of the molecule in addition to the proteic part. The IOF would probably not be a pure polysaccharide because that would not migrate well in SDS-PAGE gels and form a sharp band (SDS binds strongly only to proteins). Moreover, polysaccharides are not expected to be heat-sensitive.

The question of enzymatic nature should be posed with caution. The IOF behaves like an enzyme because it is inhibited by heat and HgCl₂. However, enzymes are large proteins
(usually >10 kDa) and are generally inhibited by moderate concentrations of KCN and HgCl₂. For example, the activity of the _Leptothrix discophora_ iron-oxidizing protein is ~3.3 times less in the presence of 0.1 mM HgCl₂ and ~4.5 times less in the presence of 0.2 mM NaCN (De Vrind-de Jong et al. 1990). In the present case, inhibition occurs only with higher concentrations of HgCl₂. If not an enzyme itself, perhaps the IOF is a breakdown product of a former iron-oxidizing enzymatic protein (possibly a glycosylated oligopeptide) and is generated during the sample preparation procedure. Although the IOF nature awaits further research, the IOF still can be described as a catalyst of iron oxidation.

Another procedure for Fe(III) precipitation has been demonstrated in the biofilm: microbial degradation of Fe(III) organic complexes. This process was demonstrated here with Fe(III) citrate at pH 6.5 and 20°C in well-oxygenated seawater, but not at pH 8.2, probably because of the rapid chemical degradation of complexes under these experimental conditions. The exact process of Fe(III) precipitation from complexes is unknown. It may have been brought about indirectly as a consequence of metabolism that changed the environmental conditions (e.g., pH) and the degree of complexation (Gerke 1997), or it could happen directly by way of enzymatic degradation of citrate. Bacteria and protozoans capable of Fe(III) organic complexes degradation are well known (Ehrlich 1990; Harding and Royt 1990), and Fe(III) organic complexes are probably abundant in seawater (Gledhill and van den Berg 1994). However, this way of iron precipitation needs heterotrophic microorganisms and, indeed, close relatives of heterotrophic eubacteria were detected in the biofilm by molecular and cultivation methods (Gillan et al. 1998; Gillan and De Ridder, unpublished). In addition, cultivation studies indicate that the number of colony-forming units per biofilm (per bivalve) are significantly higher (t-test, P = 0.045) when the culture media contains iron complexed to citrate than in culture media without complexed iron (Gillan and De Ridder, unpublished). It is thus possible that this process of iron deposition occurs in the biofilm.

In summary, we believe that Fe(III) deposition in the biofilm covering _M. ferruginosa_ may be explained by at least four different processes: microbial Fe(II) oxidation by an extracellular IOF; degradation of Fe(III) organic complexes; binding of Fe(II) to anionic groups of exopolymeric substances, followed by nonbiological autoxidation; and direct accumulation of colloidal Fe oxyhydroxides from seawater. Although only the two first types of processes have been studied here, the two other processes are more classical and have already been suggested or demonstrated for other bacteria associated with Fe(III) deposits (Macrae and Edwards 1972; Ghiorse 1984; Ferris 1989). Accordingly, these two last processes could also occur in the biofilm. The two first processes are active processes, requiring metabolically active specific microbes, such that without such microbes, the composition and abundance of Fe(III) minerals on the bivalve would probably be very different. Moreover, chemical conditions in biofilms may be radically different from those of the bulk water (Little et al. 1997). The two first processes, therefore, demonstrated here at pH 6.0–6.5, should be considered seriously.

Fe(III)-encrusted microbial communities are frequently observed in deposits (biolaminated or not) and iron formations from Early Proterozoic to modern ages (Muir 1978; Knoll and Awramik 1983; Dahanayake and Krumbein 1986; Bourque and Boulvain 1993; Mamet et al. 1997; Préat et al. 1999a, 1999b). In the geological literature, microfossils of these strata are frequently presumed to be petrified remains of iron- and manganese-oxidizing bacteria, similar as those found today in freshwater and terrestrial environments (Muir 1978). Such observations are frequently used to infer paleometabolisms and paleoenvironmental conditions such as oxygen levels. However, as illustrated in this study with living microorganisms, the simple presence of precipitated Fe(III) on microbes (or microfossils) cannot be taken as diagnostic for any particular metabolism or any Fe(III) precipitation pathway;
other (paleo)environmental data are necessary to give clues about the kind of microbial processes involved. For example, Fe(III)-encrusted microfossils have been found in red matrices of different European Paleozoic and Mesozoic series (Mamet et al. 1997; Préat et al. 1999a, 1999b). Sedimentological data suggested these were from deep environments (>100 m, well below the photic zone), microaerophilic conditions, low organic-matter content, and paucity of benthic macrofauna. Under such conditions, microbial Fe(II) oxidation could have been more significant in comparison with other Fe(III) deposition processes. The most we can conclude is that in the present day environment, Fe(III)-encrusted microbial communities such as the biofilm of *M. ferruginosa* deserve better attention because they could constitute living models of ancient Fe(III) microbial ecosystems, which seem to be abundant in the geological record.

References


