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Porphyrin Binding to Gun4 protein, Facilitated by a Flexible Loop, Controls Metabolite Flow through the Chlorophyll Biosynthetic Pathway

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Background: The Gun4 protein stimulates activity of Mg-chelatase and it is important for chlorophyll biosynthesis.

Results: Mechanism of porphyrin-binding by Gun4 was proposed and a Gun4 mutant characterized in detail.

Conclusion: Gun4 controls substrate-channeling into chlorophyll biosynthesis.

Significance: *In silico*, *in vitro* and *in vivo* data were integrated to explain the function of Gun4 protein.

ABSTRACT

In oxygenic phototrophs, chlorophylls, hemes and bilins are synthesized by a common branched pathway. Given the phototoxic nature of tetrapyrroles, this pathway must be tightly regulated and an important regulatory role is attributed to Mg-chelatase enzyme at the branching between the heme and chlorophyll pathway. Gun4 is a porphyrin-binding protein known to stimulate *in vitro* the Mg-chelatase activity but how the Gun4-porphyrin complex acts in the cell was unknown. To address this issue we first performed simulations to determine the porphyrin-docking mechanism to the cyanobacterial Gun4 structure. After correcting crystallographic loop contacts, we determined the binding site for Mg-protoporphyrin IX. Molecular modeling revealed that the orientation of $\alpha 6/\alpha 7$ loop is critical for the binding and the magnesium ion held within the porphyrin is coordinated by Asn211 residue. We also identified the basis for stronger binding in the Gun4-1 variant and for weaker binding in the W192A mutant. The W192A-Gun4 was further characterized in Mg-chelatase assay showing that tight porphyrin-binding in Gun4 facilitates its interaction with the Mg-chelatase ChlH subunit. Finally, we introduced the W192A mutation into cells and show that the Gun4-porphyrin complex is important for the accumulation of ChlH and for channeling

metabolites into the chlorophyll biosynthetic pathway.

Tetrapyrrole biosynthesis ranks amongst the most fundamental pathways in living systems, leading to production of heme, siroheme and vitamin B12. Synthesis of heme is conserved among all three domains of life, starting with synthesis of δ -aminolevulinic acid (ALA), which is converted through several enzymatic steps into protoporphyrin IX (P_{IX}) - a metal-free porphyrin ring. P_{IX} is a substrate for ferrochelatase, which catalyzes the insertion of iron to produce heme.

The tetrapyrrole biosynthetic pathway is more complex in photosynthetic organisms because, apart from heme, they usually require large quantities of other tetrapyrrole end-products. (Bacterio)chlorophylls are critical cofactors of the photosynthetic apparatus, and cyanobacteria and red algae also produce large amounts of linear phycobilins serving for light capture in phycobilisomes. The synthesis of (bacterio)chlorophylls, hemes, and bilins shares the same pathway up until P_{IX}, at which point the ferrochelatase competes for the same substrate with magnesium chelatase (MgCh). Insertion of Mg²⁺ by MgCh leads to Mg-protoporphyrin IX (MgP), the first intermediate on the (bacterio)chlorophyll branch. This step is followed by methylation of MgP by MgP methyltransferase enzyme (ChlM).

Tetrapyrroles are phototoxic, so their biosynthesis must be tightly regulated to prevent accumulation of intermediates. However, there are special features of this pathway in organisms performing oxygenic photosynthesis (cyanobacteria, algae and plants) that cause its regulation to be particularly important and complex. These organisms produce chlorophyll (Chl) and heme under light and in the presence of oxygen, which is a dangerous environment for dealing with high concentration of tetrapyrroles (1,2). Moreover, the relative levels of heme and Chl are quite different and the rate of their formation depends on actual growth conditions (3,4). Photosynthetic cells must control the total flow through the tetrapyrrole pathway while precisely distributing P_{IX} into heme and Chl

Role of porphyrin-binding by Gun4 protein

branches. There is likely a complex regulatory network securing the synthesis of tetrapyrrole end-products in required amounts while keeping the intermediate concentration extremely low; (reviewed in 5,6).

It is accepted that both ferrochelatase and MgCh play an important regulatory role in allocation of metabolites into the heme/Chl branches (6-9). The mechanism by which this occurs, however, is far from clear. Ferrochelatase is a single-subunit enzyme but MgCh requires three subunits (ChlH, ChlI, ChlD) for activity. In bacteriochlorophyll-producing bacteria these three subunits are sufficient for a highly active MgCh enzyme when assayed *in vitro* (10). In contrast, MgCh from cyanobacteria, algae and plants requires a protein called Gun4 that strongly enhances MgCh activity *in vitro* (11-13), and very likely also *in vivo* (14,15).

Gun4 was shown to bind various porphyrins, exhibiting the highest affinity to MgP, the product of MgCh enzyme, and a weaker affinity to P_{IX} (13,16). There is evidence that Gun4 physically interacts with ChlH (11,14,17), which is the porphyrin-binding MgCh subunit that presumably also contains the active site for chelation (18). Available *in vitro* kinetic data imply that Gun4 stimulates MgCh by substantially reducing the P_{IX} and Mg²⁺ concentrations required for catalysis (12). Inactivation of the *gun4* gene perturbs Chl biosynthesis and accumulation of Chl-binding proteins in cyanobacteria (14), green algae (15) as well as in plants (11,19). However, phenotypes of available Gun4 mutants are difficult to explain simply by a defect in MgCh activity and the *in vivo* activities of Gun4 appear to be complex (15,19,20).

Although it is widely accepted that the role of Gun4 depends on tight porphyrin binding (20,21), there is no conclusive model of how the Gun4-porphyrin complex is implicated in the control of tetrapyrrole biosynthesis. Here, we employed *in silico* modeling, which allows us to identify the MgP-binding pocket and provides an atomic-level description of the MgP-binding mechanism for cyanobacterial Gun4. Having a detailed view on interactions between Gun4 and

MgP, we replaced the Trp192 residue to obtain a Gun4 variant (W192A) with significantly weakened affinity for porphyrins. The W192A mutation was explored *in vitro* in a MgCh assay and *in vivo* in the cyanobacterium *Synechocystis* sp. PCC 6803 (hereafter *Synechocystis*). These experiments revealed that the weaker affinity of W192A-Gun4 to porphyrins compromised the formation of Gun4-ChlH complex. As the *Synechocystis gun4-W192A* strain was deficient in Chl precursors and exhibits a defect in accumulation of ChlH and ChlM, the porphyrin-driven interaction between Gun4-ChlH appears to be crucial for the formation and maintenance of an active MgCh enzyme.

EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURES

Molecular dynamics

Simulations were performed with the AMBER11 molecular modeling suite (22). All systems were first prepared at pH 7.7 using the Protein Preparation Wizard from Schrodinger (23). The parm99 force field was used to define the parameters of the proteins in combination with a truncated octahedron water box containing ~24000 TIP3P water molecules. Na⁺ and Cl⁻ ions were added to neutralize and reach an ionic strength of 0.15 M. After standard equilibration, we performed 200 ns of molecular dynamics at constant pressure and temperature (NPT ensemble) using the Berendsen barostat and thermostat. RMSF analysis was performed using the Python PRODY library and cross-correlation maps were computed using the ptraj tool from the Ambergtools 13 package.

Loop prediction

The Prime loop prediction tool (Prime, version 3.8, Schrödinger, LLC, New York, USA) was used to model conformations of the $\alpha 2/\alpha 3$ and $\alpha 6/\alpha 7$ loops in the Gun4 core domain. Due to the size of the loops, we used the extended loop prediction options. Side chains with less than 7.5 Å of separation were also refined and the 10 lowest energy structures were minimized. The crystal symmetry option was used to predict

Role of porphyrin-binding by Gun4 protein

the effect of crystal contacts. Dielectric constants were 1 and 80 for the (solvent exposed) internal and external environments, respectively.

Simulation of the porphyrin binding to Gun4 by PELE

PELE (Protein Energy Landscape Exploration), a Monte Carlo algorithm developed specifically to explore protein ligand interactions (24), was used to model porphyrin binding. In PELE each Monte Carlo step comprises two main parts: perturbation and relaxation. Perturbation consists of a random translation and rotation of the ligand plus an anisotropic network model (ANM) procedure to model backbone fluctuations. Relaxation involves optimization of the side chains local to the ligand and a global minimization. Then, the step is rejected or accepted using a metropolis criterion to generate a realistic distribution of the configurations generated.

Entrance simulations initially placed the ligand in the bulk solvent, outside of the binding site. Using the spawning algorithms in PELE, the ligand was then directed to enter into the active site. This algorithm constrains the ligand random search within a sphere around 18 Å from a given (chosen) point. If the ligand escapes this sphere, it will be placed in the closest conformation to the reference given point found by any explorer (trajectory). The Alpha carbon in Phe160 was used as the spawning center (representative of an active site position).

PELE was able to find binding poses in ~24 hours using 48 trajectories (with 1 trajectory per computing core), using random translations and rotations in the 1-7Å and 0-90° ranges, respectively. Once the ligand reached the active site, local refinement explorations used a smaller spawning sphere, 10 Å, and a smaller translation of 0.5 Å to better explore the binding energy profile in the bound region. A total of ~50,000 accepted Monte Carlo steps were produced in this refinement process, requiring approximately 240 trajectories, each running 24 hours.

Construction of the Synechocystis mutant strains and the growth conditions

In order to prepare *Synechocystis* Δ *gun4*, we made a linear PCR construct by the method of (25) containing the zeocin resistance cassette fused with *gun4* flanking sequences (~300 bp) to allow homologous recombination. After transformation into WT cells and segregation, the zeocin cassette replaced almost the entire *gun4* gene (bp 119 – 694).

For the construction of the *gun4W192A* strain we cloned the chromosomal fragment containing the *gun4* gene and 300-bp DNA upstream and downstream flanking regions into pUC18 vector (Life Technologies) between *EcoRI* and *BamHI* restriction sites. The W192A mutation was inserted into the cloned *gun4* gene using the QuikChange II Site-Directed Mutagenesis Kit (Agilent Technologies). The pUC18-*gun4W192A* plasmid was transformed into the above-described *Synechocystis* Δ *gun4* strain and photoautotrophic transformants were selected on BG11 agar plates at 28°C and 30 μ mol photons $m^{-2} s^{-1}$. *Synechocystis* cells were grown in liquid culture in 250 ml Erlenmeyer flasks on a rotary shaker at 28°C and bubbled with air.

Absorption spectra, determination of Chl content and quantification of Chl precursors

Absorption spectra of whole cells were measured at room temperature using a Shimadzu UV-3000 spectrophotometer (Kyoto, Japan). Chl was extracted from cell pellets (1 mL, $OD_{750} \sim 0.4$) with 100% (V/V) methanol, and its concentration was measured spectrophotometrically according to (26). For the quantitative determination of Chl precursors in *Synechocystis* cells, 2 mL of culture at $OD_{750} \sim 0.4$ were quickly harvested and the extracted pigments analyzed essentially as described in (27).

Electrophoresis and immunoblotting

To analyze protein levels, *Synechocystis* cells in exponential growth phase ($OD_{750} \sim 0.4$) were harvested by centrifugation, washed,

Role of porphyrin-binding by Gun4 protein

resuspended in the buffer containing 25 mM HEPES/NaOH, pH 7.4, 5 mM CaCl₂, 10 mM MgCl₂, and 20% ^{w/v} glycerol, and broken using glass beads. Cell extracts were further denatured in 2 % SDS and 1 % dithiothreitol for 30 min at room temperature and separated in a 10 % polyacrylamide gel using a mini BioRad system. For immunoblotting, proteins were transferred onto a PVDF membrane (Sigma, Germany), probed with specific primary antibodies followed by the secondary antibody conjugated to horseradish peroxidase (Sigma, Germany). The primary antibodies raised against recombinant *Synechocystis* Gun4 were kindly provided by Prof. Annegret Wilde (Universität Freiburg, Germany).

Circular dichroism spectra, tryptophan quenching, and in vitro MgCh enzyme assays

To obtain recombinant Gun4 and W192A proteins, the *Synechocystis gun4* gene was cloned into the pET14b plasmid and purified as for the *Thermosynechococcus elongatus* protein as reported previously (28). The W192A mutation was introduced into the pET14(b):*gun4* plasmid by the same procedure used for construction of the *Synechocystis gun4W192A* strain (see above). Recombinant subunits of *Synechocystis* MgCh were expressed and purified as described in (29).

CD spectra were recorded using a JASCO-810 spectrometer (JASCO, Great Dunmow, UK). Protein was dissolved in water to a concentration of 1 mg ml⁻¹, and analysed in a cuvette with a 0.2 cm path length. Spectra were recorded stepwise, from 250 – 190 nm in 1 nm increments, 4 seconds/nm.

Porphyrin-binding studies were carried out on a Jobin Yvon Fluoromax 3 spectrofluorometer fitted with a temperature-controlled cuvette holder. The samples consisted of 1 μM protein in 50 mM MOPS/KOH, 11 mM KCl, 1 mM DTT, 0.3 M glycerol, pH 7.7 at 34 °C. Titrations were performed by addition of porphyrin and incubated for 2 minutes before recording fluorescence (λ_{ex} = 280 ± 4.5 nm, λ_{em} = 350 ± 18 nm). Changes in volume were < 5 %, and

were taken into account in calculating dissociation constants by using the titration mode in DynaFit 4 (Biokin Ltd.).

Functional MgCh enzyme assays were performed essentially as described previously (17). Calibration curves using known standard concentrations of Mg-deuteroporphyrin IX (MgD) were created for each concentration of Gun4 analyzed. Plots of MgCh steady state activity with respect to Gun4 concentration were fitted using Igor Pro (Wavemetrics Inc) to provide apparent constants for the formation of the MgCh.Gun4 complex (K_{app}). At high (8 μM) D_{IX} concentrations, the activity of MgCh is inhibited when Gun4 reaches high concentrations. These data were fitted to equation 1, which allows for this observed inhibition by calculating an apparent inhibition constant (K^i_{app}). At low concentrations of D_{IX} (0.8 μM), no inhibition is found in the Gun4 concentration range observed, therefore equation 2 was used to obtain estimates of complex formation. In equations 1 and 2, v_{ss} is the observed rate of MgCh, v_{ss} is the rate of MgCh in absence of Gun4 and V_{max} is the theoretical maximum rate.

$$v_{ss} = c + \left(\frac{V_{max}}{1 + \frac{K_{app}}{[Gun4]} + \frac{K^i_{app}}{K_{app}}} \right) \quad \text{Equation 1}$$

$$v_{ss} = c + \left(\frac{V_{max}}{1 + \frac{K_{app}}{[Gun4]}} \right) \quad \text{Equation 2}$$

RESULTS

Comparison of available crystal structures of Gun4 proteins and the prediction of loops

In order to study the role of porphyrin binding by the Gun4 protein, we performed *in silico* modeling, where recent developments (mainly motivated by the pharmacological industry) have allowed an accurate all-atom description of the ligand binding mechanism for complex systems such as Gun4 (30-32). First, we inspected the

Role of porphyrin-binding by Gun4 protein

three available Gun4 crystal structures, all in the porphyrin-free form, deposited in the Protein Data Bank when this project commenced: the *Synechocystis* Gun4 protein (13), the Gun4 from *Thermosynechococcus elongatus* and so called Gun4-1 mutant (L105F) also from *T. elongatus* (12). We note that two more structures have been reported since (33,34). As previously reported (12), *T. elongatus* Gun4 and L105F structures are practically identical except for the L105F change. *Synechocystis* and *T. elongatus* WT structures, however, show large differences in orientation of $\alpha 2/\alpha 3$ and $\alpha 6/\alpha 7$ loops (Fig. 1), part of the highly conserved Gun4 core domain (13). Based on an extensive analysis of site-directed *Synechocystis* Gun4 mutant proteins and NMR chemical shift measurements, this core domain was proposed as the porphyrin binding pocket (Fig. 1; 13). However, it should be noted that docking of MgP into the binding pocket as proposed by (13) is not possible for *Synechocystis* Gun4. The tight packing derived from the above loop orientations introduces severe steric clashes that return no bound poses from standard docking approaches.

Interestingly, while the $\alpha 2/\alpha 3$ loop has high atomic crystal β -factors, the $\alpha 6/\alpha 7$ one presents quite low scores, indicating its rigidity (not common in such a large loop) or constrained nature. Indeed, inspection of the X-ray symmetric unit indicated critical crystallographic contacts capable of defining (constraining) the $\alpha 6/\alpha 7$ loop position. The number of interactions in this region is larger in *Synechocystis* Gun4 and their nature (salt bridges) is also stronger. In particular, in *Synechocystis* Gun4 we find Trp192-Glu7, Arg191-Glu49 and Thr190-Glu49 contacts, whereas in the *T. elongatus* structure we only observe the Lys192-His69 one. The conformational mobility of the $\alpha 6/\alpha 7$ loop appears to drive a change in the mobile $\alpha 2/\alpha 3$ adjacent loop, which further restricts the porphyrin access into the putative binding pocket (Fig. 1).

To check if these contacts produce crystallographic artifacts in the loops, we performed loop prediction in presence and absence of crystal mates. In solution, where no

crystal mates are included, the predicted $\alpha 6/\alpha 7$ loop for *T. elongatus* Gun4 is more closed, but still similar to the original structure with an overall open conformation. The predicted *Synechocystis* Gun4 structure, however, drastically changes from the crystal structure (Fig. 1B), with an overall alpha carbon RMSD of 6.1 Å and an open structure similar to the one obtained from *T. elongatus*. Additionally, the $\alpha 2/\alpha 3$ loop also significantly moved in the predicted *Synechocystis* Gun4, further opening the cavity (Fig. 1C). We also noted that the conserved aromatic Trp192 residue, located at the $\alpha 6/\alpha 7$ loop, markedly turned and adopted a similar position to the homologous Tyr197 residue in *T. elongatus* Gun4 (Fig. 1B). The Trp192/Tyr197 residue has been reported to be important for porphyrin binding (12) and therefore we selected a Trp192 mutant Gun4 for *in silico*, *in vitro* and *in vivo* analysis.

The Prime loop prediction software allows running simulations that take into account the crystallographic symmetry by adding neighboring units into the model. Assuming neighboring sidechains help to constrain loop structures, one would expect to reproduce the crystal structure. This is actually what happens in Gun4, where simulations with crystal mates produce loops with a ~1-2 Å alpha carbon RMSD with respect to the crystallographically determined structures (hardly distinguishable from the experimental structures). Taken together, these results on both systems point to a strong bias in the loop conformation mediated by crystallographic contacts; thus, the conformation of functionally important loops in Gun4 cannot be assessed purely on the basis of crystallographic data, and study/correction with *in silico* methods (now a well-established practice; 35), is required. Importantly, this bias, originating from the structural data for crystallographic Gun4, produces a conformation with the loop restricting the access to the expected binding pocket. Thus, we adopted the corrected semi-open loop conformation, as modeled in solution by Prime, for the next round of simulations.

Role of porphyrin-binding by Gun4 protein

Molecular simulations of porphyrin binding into WT and mutant Synechocystis Gun4 proteins

To map the porphyrin binding mechanism, we performed simulations in which the ligand, starting in the bulk solvent, is asked to enter the binding site. We focused on the *Synechocystis* Gun4 structure because a detailed analysis of site-directed mutants has been already performed together with NMR measurements (13). In addition, *Synechocystis* Gun4 mutants can be explored using both *in vitro* and *in vivo* systems. Figure 2 shows four different snapshots underlining the porphyrin docking mechanism into *Synechocystis* Gun4 as observed in the PELE simulation (the entire migration movie can be seen in Suppl. movie 1). In panel A we show the initial structure where we placed the porphyrin ligand in the bulk solvent outside the Gun4 binding pocket. Panel B shows a recurrent pre-docking pose for the protein surface observed for both metal and non-metal porphyrins. In this pose, the porphyrin stacks onto the Arg113 side chain and forms hydrogen bonds with two glutamines (Gln126 and Gln128) present in the $\alpha 2/\alpha 3$ loop. From this pre-docking site, the porphyrin moves into the binding pocket forming an interesting axial coordination-like motif with Asn211 and Arg113; we named this site binding pocket-A (Fig. 2C, Fig. 3A). As shown below, this structure represents a steady-state in protein-ligand interaction energy. From this pose, however, the porphyrin can migrate deeper into the binding pocket with less ligand exposure to solvent, and with porphyrin propionate groups anchored by interactions with Arg214 and Asn211; we named this site binding pocket-B (Fig. 2D, Fig. 3B).

To better characterize the porphyrin binding mode, we performed a refinement search where MgP, starting at pocket-A, is allowed to explore a distance of up to 10 Å (measured as the ligand center of mass displacement to the Asn211 side chain oxygen). Fig. 4A shows the protein-MgP interaction energies for the 50000 configurations sampled in this refinement procedure. We clearly observe the existence of two minima, which correspond to binding pockets A and B, with

similar (~degenerate) interaction energies. We note that these interaction energies are derived from a classical force field not including any metal coordination component (beyond electrostatic attraction).

To distinguish which of these two minima might better represent the biological system, we compared interacting residues with previously reported studies of site-directed Gun4 mutants (12,13). Indeed, a number of residues which affect binding are involved in both positions (Fig. 3). However, a mutation in Asn211, which is placed in a coordination position with MgP in the less-deep pocket-A (Fig. 3A) has been shown to exert a significant effect on the affinity of the MgP analog MgD than for deuteroporphyrin IX (D_{IX}) (12). Additionally, the residue homologous to Trp192 in *T. elongatus* (Tyr197), which participates directly in binding only in pocket-A (Fig. 3A), is required for high affinity porphyrin binding (12), see below. On the other hand, replacement of Ser221 has almost no effect on binding (13), which is not in agreement with the situation in pocket-B, where Ser221 forms a hydrogen bond to MgP (Fig. 3B). These are strong indications that the less-deep docking position-A is closer to the real binding pocket.

To verify our model further we studied the W192A mutant. This residue and Tyr197 are oriented differently in the original *Synechocystis* and *T. elongatus* structures (Fig. 1) but, after loop prediction and docking, Trp192 and Tyr197 are both exposed into the proposed binding pocket A (Fig. 1B, Fig. 3A). First, we compared recombinant *Synechocystis* WT and Gun4-W192A proteins. Circular dichroism spectra showed that the WT and W192A Gun4 have very similar secondary and tertiary structures (Fig. 5). However, a difference in the 200-210 nm region indicates a slightly more compact fold for the W192A protein. Indeed, the affinities of the mutated Gun4 for D_{IX} and MgD were 2 and 3 times weaker than the WT, respectively (Table I). Then we repeated the PELE local refinement search for W192A, observing that the mutant has slightly higher interaction energies and lower density of points at the bottom of the minima. To better quantify this, we binned all points in

Role of porphyrin-binding by Gun4 protein

groups of 4 kcal/mol (Fig. 4B). By doing so, we can now appreciate more clearly the weaker (shift in) interaction energies for the W192A mutant. The direct role of Trp192 on porphyrin binding is evident from our detailed atomic simulations: inspecting the WT structures along the refinement trajectories, we observe the direct interaction between the Trp192 side chain and the porphyrin group (Fig. 6 and Suppl. movie 2).

Dynamic simulations of T. elongatus WT and L105F Gun4 proteins: cross-correlation maps

The Gun4-1 mutation was originally identified in a chlorophyll-deficient Arabidopsis mutant with lesions of signaling between the chloroplast and nucleus (11,37). The basis for the effect of the Leu → Phe (L105F in *T. elongatus* Gun4) missense mutation has not been elucidated. Our model shows that while the *Synechocystis* Trp192 residue is in direct contact with the bound porphyrin model, Leu105 in *T. elongatus* Gun4 is located far away from the porphyrin binding site (Fig. 1). Moreover, WT and Gun4-1 *T. elongatus* crystal structures do not show significant differences (12). Therefore, the mechanism by which the enigmatic Gun4-1 mutation confers a much tighter porphyrin binding (K_d for D_{IX} and MgD decreased 15-fold and 11-fold respectively; 12) poses a real challenge. In order to address this issue, and seeking possible dynamic effects, we employed molecular dynamics simulations.

We performed 200 ns molecular dynamics simulations of *T. elongatus* Gun4 and Gun4-L105F and analyzed the dynamics with RMSF (root mean square fluctuation) and cross correlation maps. As seen in Figure 7A, replacement of Leu105 by Phe produces a significant change in the RMSF of several regions, by up to 1Å. The most important change concerning porphyrin-binding is the clear loss of mobility in the $\alpha 6/\alpha 7$ loop (residues 175-215) for the L105F mutant. The (residue movement) difference cross correlation map, shown in Figure 7B, allowed us to establish the mechanism for such a reduction in mobility. If we follow the position around Leu105, we

clearly see two main correlated (red) groups (marked in Fig. 7B). As expected, several residues of helix 2 (110-125) in contact with Leu105, are correlated in their motion. More importantly, residues of the $\alpha 6/\alpha 7$ loop exhibit marked correlation with Leu105.

Effect of the W192A mutation on MgCh activity and Chl biosynthesis

In order to understand the physiological role of Gun4 in the cell we extended the mechanistic description arising from our binding model and performed kinetic and *in vivo* analyses on the W192A and WT Gun4 proteins. The ability of the W192A mutant to stimulate MgCh activity was assessed by titrating either *Synechocystis* Gun4 WT or W192A recombinant protein into MgCh assays and monitoring the steady state rate; the more water-soluble porphyrin D_{IX} was used as a substrate instead of P_{IX} . Both Gun4 and W192A stimulated activity approximately 3-fold compared to MgCh activity alone. However, at high concentrations of D_{IX} substrate (8 μ M) the K_{app} (the apparent binding constant for MgCh-Gun4 complex formation) suggests that the Gun4 WT has almost 3-fold tighter binding with MgCh compared to the W192A mutant. At low concentrations (0.8 μ M D_{IX}) this effect was even more pronounced with a 4-fold difference in K_{app} between WT and W192A, and a 50 % decrease in V_{max} between WT and W192A (Table II). At 8 μ M D_{IX} there is evidence of inhibition at high concentrations of Gun4 (Fig. 8, closed symbols).

Together, these data imply that the lowered affinity of Gun4 to porphyrin leads to a weaker interaction between the mutated Gun4 and the core MgCh complex, and this defect is emphasized at low substrate concentrations.

To monitor possible effects of the W192A mutation *in vivo*, we constructed a *Synechocystis gun4-W192A* strain possessing the *gun4-W192A* allele instead of the original *gun4* gene. Mutated cells exhibited no difference in phycobilisome content but contained 20% less Chl under moderate light conditions (30 μ E of photons) and 35% less Chl under saturating light (300 μ E of photons; Fig. 9A). Under these conditions the

Role of porphyrin-binding by Gun4 protein

cellular levels of mutated Gun4, ChlH and ChlM were comparable with WT levels (Fig. 9B) although the mutant contained significantly more ChlI associated with membranes (Fig. 9B). In order to identify how the W192A mutation affects Chl biosynthesis, we analyzed pools of all intermediates in the tetrapyrrole pathway from coproporphyrin(ogen) III (CoPP) to chlorophyllide. Detection was based on a separation by an HPLC system connected with two fluorescence detectors (Fig. 9C). Notably, even under moderate light intensity, the mutant exhibited significantly decreased levels of MgP, MgP methyl ester and both the monovinyl and divinyl forms of protochlorophyllide. However, the mutant did not accumulate P_{IX}; in fact, levels of CoPP and P_{IX} were rather lower in the mutant (Fig. 9C).

The result of the kinetic study of the MgCh enzyme *in vitro* (Table II) indicated that the effect of the W192A mutation *in vivo* should be more pronounced when the level of MgCh substrate P_{IX} decreases. To mimic such a situation, we depleted pools of Chl precursors by incubating cells for 12 hours in a growth medium without nitrogen (Fig. 10A). After this treatment the only detectable Chl precursor is monovinyl-chlorophyllide which, however, originates from dephytylation of existing Chl and not from de novo synthesis (36). Chl biosynthesis was re-started by adding of NaNO₃ and after 2 hours a divinyl-protochlorophyllide peak became visible in WT chromatograms (Fig. 10B). In the *gun4-W192A* strain Chl biosynthesis was much delayed; there was no detectable protochlorophyllide pool and the amount of MgP methyl ester is ~ 20% of that in the WT. Levels of CoPP and P_{IX} were however similar (Fig. 10B) in both strains, suggesting that either the flux through the whole pathway is down-regulated in the mutant and/or any excess of P_{IX} is metabolized by ferrochelatase. Levels of WT and mutated Gun4 changed just slightly during nitrogen starvation but the ChlI subunit and the ChlM enzyme were significantly reduced and the ChlH subunit almost completely disappeared in both strains (Fig. 9B). Interestingly, after adding nitrogen, both the ChlH and ChlM started to

accumulate and this accumulation was apparently delayed in the mutant (Fig. 9B). We can therefore conclude that the Gun4-porphyrin complex is important for quick re-activation of Chl biosynthesis after a period of nutrient stress.

DISCUSSION

Mechanism of porphyrin binding to the Gun4 protein

Gun4 is required for the synthesis of sufficient amounts of Chl in all groups of oxygenic phototrophs. It also appears that Gun4 proteins from virtually all sources stimulate MgCh activity via an interaction with the ChlH subunit, and bind porphyrins, with the highest affinity to MgP (14,16,17). The essential role of porphyrin-binding for Gun4 function can be suggested from amino-acid alignments (13) as residues in the proposed MgP binding site ($\alpha 6/\alpha 7$ loop residues, Arg214, Asn211) are conserved through evolution from cyanobacteria to plants.

NMR data, crystal structures and site-directed mutagenesis suggested that the porphyrin binding region lies within the pocket formed at the intersection of the hydrophobic $\alpha 6/\alpha 7$ loop, the $\alpha 2/\alpha 3$ loop and by helices $\alpha 2$ and $\alpha 7$ (Fig. 1). However, the mechanism of the Gun4 – porphyrin interaction and how Gun4 discriminates between empty and metal-bound porphyrins remained unknown.

Our data imply that the orientation of the $\alpha 6/\alpha 7$ loop is critical for porphyrin binding. After removing the crystallographic artifacts, arising from protein-protein interactions in the crystal, the $\alpha 6/\alpha 7$ loop in both *Synechocystis* and *T. elongatus* Gun4 adopted similar configurations, indicating that the shape of the loop is conserved (Fig. 1B,C). The observed flexibility of the $\alpha 6/\alpha 7$ loop and its possible conformational changes after porphyrin binding are consistent with changes in NMR-determined chemical shifts upon addition of D_{IX} (13).

An important finding of our simulation is the ability of Asn211 to co-ordinate MgP, which offers an explanation of the stronger affinity for

Role of porphyrin-binding by Gun4 protein

MgP than P_{IX}, demonstrated experimentally (Table I). As described earlier we expect that the binding pocket-A, which includes co-ordination of MgP by Asn211 (Fig. 3A), is closer to the real pocket. Interestingly, the replacement of Trp192 by alanine had stronger effect on the binding of MgD than to D_{IX} yielding a Gun4 with almost equal affinity for both these porphyrins (Table I). It is possible that the Trp192 is critical for the positioning of MgP in the proximity to Asn211. It would be interesting to employ PELE to compare binding energies for MgP and P_{IX} in WT and W192A mutant. However, the lack of accuracy when describing metal interactions by classical force fields does not allow a quantitative comparison between these two porphyrins.

While this paper was under review a *Synechocystis* Gun4 structure with bound MgD has been deposited to the Protein Data Bank (33). In this structure the loop orientation is more open than predicted by our modeling work, and therefore the bound MgD is in a more planar orientation with respect to the $\alpha6/\alpha7$ loop and it lies closer to Helix 7. However, the main conclusions we derived from the simulations are valid: the $\alpha6/\alpha7$ loop residues are crucial for the formation of a relatively shallow binding pocket, MgP is coordinated by Asn211 and also the Trp192 residue interacts with MgD essentially as we proposed.

Asn211 is highly conserved and we speculate that the co-ordination is a universal feature of Gun4 proteins. On the other hand, there might be some variability in orientation of porphyrin propionates groups between cyanobacterial and plant Gun4 proteins. According to (16) the homologue Arg214 residue in Arabidopsis Gun4 shows a defect in MgP binding, although it is not essential unlike in the *Synechocystis* counterpart.

The Gun4-1 mutation was originally identified in Arabidopsis as the one of several *genome uncoupled* mutations causing modified plastid-to-nucleus signaling (37). The level of Gun4-1 protein in Arabidopsis is very low (11), however this mutation was characterized later using recombinant *T. elongatus* and

Synechocystis Gun4-1 proteins that both exhibit an approximately ten-fold higher affinity for porphyrins than the WT Gun4 (12). Our results based on molecular dynamic simulations show a clear steric pathway connecting Leu105 with Helix 2 and the $\alpha6/\alpha7$ loop (Fig. 7), where the loss of mobility is effectively transmitted. Indeed, restricted flexibility of the Helix 2 and the $\alpha6/\alpha7$ loop can significantly affect the porphyrin binding supporting the critical role of these segments in our docking model (Fig. 2).

The role of Gun4 in regulation of tetrapyrrole biosynthesis

Although Gun4 proteins bind a broad spectrum of porphyrins including heme *b* or pheophorbide (16), MgP might be the crucial ligand *in vivo*, because there is evidence that only the binding of MgP (the product of MgCh) but not P_{IX} (MgCh substrate) enhances MgCh activity. This assumption is based on an *in vitro* analysis of *Synechocystis* Gun4 proteins mutated at residues critical for binding D_{IX} but not for binding MgD and vice versa. Mutants of Gun4 where D_{IX} binding is abolished are still able to stimulate MgCh activity, whereas Gun4 mutants incapable of binding MgD completely failed to stimulate MgCh (13). These results suggest that Gun4 is implicated in release of the product (MgP) from ChlH. The fact that MgP is coordinated by the highly-conserved Asn211 indicates that Gun4 has evolved to bind MgP (or to bind it better than P_{IX}) and connects the function of Gun4 with binding of this porphyrin. In the *in vitro* assay at limiting concentrations of D_{IX}, W192A-Gun4 is less effective in stimulating the MgCh enzyme due to the compromised interaction between Gun4 and the MgCh complex (Table II). It is not known when Gun4 binds to ChlH during the catalytic cycle of MgCh, but it appears that the high affinity of Gun4 to the MgP product facilitates a transient assembly of a Gun4-MgCh complex, stimulating MgCh activity. We expect that a similar defect also occurs *in vivo* in *Synechocystis gun4-W192A* cells (see below).

Role of porphyrin-binding by Gun4 protein

The *in vivo* results obtained for various Gun4 mutants show complex changes in tetrapyrrole metabolism, and it could be misleading to describe Gun4 simply as an enhancer of the MgCh enzyme. Overexpression of Gun4 in plants causes an aberrant accumulation of Chl, accompanied by elevated steady-state levels of P_{IX} and MgP porphyrins (19). In the green alga *Chlamydomonas reinhardtii*, overexpression of Gun4 also increases Chl content per cell (38), while a *C. reinhardtii* strain possessing a low Gun4 content has reduced both Chl and P_{IX} levels (15,20). Only after the complete elimination of Gun4 do cyanobacteria, algae and plants accumulate aberrant concentrations of P_{IX} (14,20,39).

To discuss the role of Gun4 in controlling Chl biosynthesis, one has to be careful in comparing data obtained from different organisms and under different growth conditions. However, the Gun4 mutations are generally more pronounced with increasing light intensity (14,19,38). The sensitivity of Gun4-less mutants to light and changes in ALA synthesizing capacity led to a hypothesis that Gun4 binds excessive porphyrins, which serves as a signal to down-regulate ALA formation (19,20). Although this model can explain reduced ALA synthesis in Gun4 or MgCh mutants (40), it is not consistent with the massive accumulation of P_{IX} in ferrochelatase mutants (8,41).

We propose an alternative model taking into account that Gun4 has been detected as a part of large membrane complexes (11). Under conditions when *Synechocystis* cells reach maximal growth rate (saturating light, intensively air-bubbled culture) Gun4 and ChlH are localized almost exclusively in the membrane fraction (Fig. 9B). Thus, the synthesis of MgP is likely located in a membrane-associated complex where Gun4 interacts with ChlH (21) and presumably also with the following enzyme ChlM (42). Although it has been reported that in plants the association of Gun4 with the membrane requires porphyrins (21), we detected Gun4 in the membrane fraction even in cells lacking virtually all Chl intermediates except chlorophyllide (Fig. 9B). Weaker affinity for

porphyrins (W192A-Gun4) or a very low content of ChlH (nitrogen depletion) does not prevent Gun4 from associating with membranes and does not significantly alter the Gun4 level (Fig. 9B). This robustness contrasts with the disappearance of ChlH during nitrogen depletion and its re-synthesis once nitrogen becomes available. As the affinity of Gun4 for porphyrins correlates with affinity of Gun4 for the MgCh enzyme complex during catalysis (Table II) we propose that in the presence of P_{IX} or MgP the interaction of Gun4 with ChlH helps to stabilize a membrane-associated MgCh/ChlM complex. A Gun4-porphyrin complex can modulate disassembly and re-assembly of this enzymatic unit and thereby expose individual components to a post-translational control. It should be noted that in both cyanobacteria and plants, MgCh subunits are present even in the absence of Gun4 (14,19). Gun4 is not essential for the synthesis/stability of these proteins but it might be a critical component allowing cells to maintain optimal channeling of P_{IX} into the Chl metabolic branch. This role would be particularly important under fluctuating conditions requiring well-tuned de-activation and re-activation of MgCh and ChlM enzymes.

Consistent with this model, the Arabidopsis Gun4-less mutant is much more sensitive to a fluctuating light regime. Under continuous low light, the mutant can be partly complemented by supplementing with ALA (24). Interestingly, in Arabidopsis lacking Gun4, the level of ChlM is drastically reduced under fluctuating conditions, but it is restored by increasing the P_{IX} concentration by exogenous ALA (19).

According to the available data it appears that there is cross-talk between the activity of the MgCh-Gun4 complex and regulation of metabolite flux through the whole tetrapyrrole pathway, keeping the P_{IX} pool small (19,20,40,43). As already discussed, other enzymes in the tetrapyrrole pathway, including ferrochelatase, could be a part of the identical membrane domain (5), so it is not difficult to imagine that the deactivation of MgCh allows ferrochelatase to attenuate ALA-formation *e.g.* via a heme-feedback loop (6). We observed that

Role of porphyrin-binding by Gun4 protein

ferrochelatase is upregulated during nitrogen starvation (Fig. 9B). The presence of Gun4 in such a complex might be structurally important, which would explain why its complete elimination causes accumulation of P_{IX}. As already noted, a low level of Gun4 is sufficient for balancing the P_{IX} pool (15).

In this work, we demonstrated that replacement of Gun4 by a variant with lower affinity for porphyrins reduced the pools of

intermediates in the Chl branch, but CoPP and P_{IX} levels are less affected. As expected from *in vitro* data, the effect of this mutation is more pronounced once the mutated cells have to deal with fluctuations of metabolites in the tetrapyrrole pathway. The docking of MgP in Gun4 and the model of Gun4-based regulation described here can serve as a framework for future studies addressing Gun4 function.

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The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest with the contents of this article.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

JK constructed the *Synechocystis w192a* strain and together with RS performed all *in vivo* experiments, ICV and VG performed molecular simulations and porphyrin docking. PAD prepared plasmid for expression of the recombinant W192A Gun4, NBPA and AAB designed and performed *in vitro* kinetic analyses and NBPA also determined dissociation constants. RS, VG, NBPA and CNH jointly wrote the article, RS had major responsibility for the project.

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Role of porphyrin-binding by Gun4 protein

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FIGURE LEGENDS

Figure 1. An overview of original Gun4 structures and the prediction of $\alpha 2/\alpha 3$ and $\alpha 6/\alpha 7$ loops. **A)** Comparison of two cyanobacterial Gun4 crystal structures; *T. elongatus* (in blue) and *Synechocystis* (in gold) corresponding to the PDB codes 1Z3X and 1Y6I, respectively (12,13). Loops involved in opening of the binding site (see main text) are highlighted. Ovals indicate sites of crystal contacts in the symmetric units. The inset shows position of Leu105 (*T. elongatus*) buried among $\alpha 1$, $\alpha 2$ and $\alpha 4$ helices. **B)** Alignment of the original *T. elongatus* structure (in beige) and the *Synechocystis* (in gold) and *T. elongatus* (in blue) structures after loop predictions by Prime. Note the similar orientation of Trp192 and Tyr197 residues. **C)** The original loop orientation and the position of Trp192 residue in the *Synechocystis* Gun4 structure (green color) compared with the lowest energy predictions by Prime without crystal mates (in red). The $\alpha 2/\alpha 3$ loop corresponds to Pro122-Phe132 residues and the highlighted part of the $\alpha 6/\alpha 7$ loop corresponds to Ser185-Gly195.

Figure 2. Four snapshots along the porphyrin migration pathway and binding site entrance in *Synechocystis* Gun4. **A)** Initial structure with a bulk solvent exposed ligand. **B)** Pre-docking pose with stacking onto Arg113 and hydrogen bonds with Gln126 and Gln128 in the $\alpha 2/\alpha 3$ loop. **C)** Pocket-A bound structure with an iron axial coordination-like motif with Asn211 and Arg113. **D)** Pocket-B bound deeper structure.

Figure 3. Interaction between MgP and Gun4 residues in two putative binding pockets identified by the PELE simulation. Diagrams (A) and (B) correspond to the position of MgP depicted in Fig. 2C and Fig. 2D, respectively. Line discontinuities in the vicinity of the propionate groups indicate larger exposure to solvent. Arrows represent hydrogen bonds, dashed line in (A) highlights co-ordination of MgP by Asn211 residue and red arrowhead shows Trp192 residue selected for mutagenesis. Residues marked by asterisk were analyzed by site-directed mutagenesis in previous reports (12,13) and in this report for Trp192; green asterisks indicate minimal effect of the replacement of given residue on porphyrin binding (an increase of $K_d < 2$ for MgP or P_{IX}), blue means a moderate effect (2-5), red asterisks mark residues, which mutation increased K_d more than five-times. Gray dots mark residues for which no data are available.

Figure 4. Analyses of the protein-MgP interaction energies by PELE. **A)** Protein-ligand interaction energy against the distance to Asn211 (side chain oxygen atom) along the refinement process for the *Synechocystis* Gun4. **B)** The result of a 4 kcal/mol binning of the interaction energies for the Gun4 (red) and the W192A (green) mutant protein.

Figure 5. Circular-dichroism spectra of the recombinant *Synechocystis* Gun4 protein and its mutated W192A variant.

Figure 6. A representative snapshot for the refinement of MgP docking in the *Synechocystis* Gun4 protein. The direct Van der Waals interaction between Trp192 and the porphyrin ligand is indicated.

Figure 7. Molecular dynamics analysis of the *T. elongatus* WT Gun4 and L105F mutant. **A)** RMSF for both species. **B)** Cross-correlation differences between *T. elongatus* WT and the L105F mutant. The black circles highlight the region corresponding to helix 2 and the $\alpha 6/\alpha 7$ loop.

Figure 8. *In vitro* stimulation of the MgCh activity by *Synechocystis* Gun4 and W192A proteins. Assembly titrations of MgCh and WT Gun4 (circles) or W192A (squares). Assays contained 0.1 μM ChlD, 0.2 μM ChlI and 0.4 μM ChlH in 50 mM MOPS/KOH, 0.3 M glycerol, 1 mM DTT, 1 mM free Mg^{2+} , $I = 0.1$ with KCl, pH 7.7 at 34 °C and closed symbols 8 μM D_{IX} , open symbols 0.8 μM D_{IX} . The curves at 8 μM D_{IX} can be described by equation 1, and at 0.8 μM D_{IX} with equation 2, with characterizing parameters in table II.

Figure 9. Chl biosynthesis in the *Synechocystis gun4-W192* strain. **A)** Whole cell absorbance spectra of the *Synechocystis* WT and *gun4-W192A* strain (W192A) grown at 30 and 300 μmol of photons $\text{m}^{-2} \text{s}^{-1}$. Chl is represented by 680 nm peak and phycobilinoproteins by the 625 nm peak. Spectra were normalized to light scattering at 750 nm. The total Chl content per optical density is indicated. **B)** Immunodetection of Gun4, MgCh ChlH and ChlI subunits, ChlM and ferrochelatase (FeCH) in the WT and *gun4-W192A* strains grown under saturating light and during nitrogen depletion and re-greening (see Results and Fig. 10 for details). The membrane (m) and soluble (s) protein fractions were separated by SDS-electrophoresis, blotted, and probed using indicated antibodies. Purple asterisk marks an unspecific cross-reaction or, potentially, a low-abundant variant of ChlH. **C)** The relative levels of Chl precursors in the *gun4-W192A* strain in comparison to the WT. Values shown represent means \pm SD from five independent measurements. Asterisks indicate statistically significant differences in precursor levels as tested using a paired Student's t-test (*, $P = 0.05$; **, $P = 0.01$). CoPP, coproporphyrin(ogen) III; P_{IX} , protoporphyrin(ogen) IX; MgPME, MgP methyl ester; DV-PChlide, divinyl-protochlorophyllide; MV-PChlide, monovinyl-protochlorophyllide; DV-Chlide, divinyl-chlorophyllide; MV-Chlide, monovinyl-chlorophyllide.

Figure 10. Analysis of Chl precursors in the *Synechocystis* WT and *gun4-W192* strains during recovery from nitrogen starvation. **A)** Levels of Chl precursors in cells grown under saturating light without nitrogen for 16 hours and **(B)** 2 hours after adding of 10 mM NaNO_3 . Extracted pigments were analyzed by HPLC equipped with a pair of fluorescence detectors (FLD1 and FLD2) set for different wavelengths to cover all Chl precursors from coproporphyrinogen III (oxidized spontaneously to coproporphyrin III) to monovinyl-chlorophyllide. Pigments are labelled as in Fig. 9.

TABLES

Table I. Dissociation constants (K_d) for the *Synechocystis* Gun4 protein and W192A mutant. Dissociation constants were calculated for deuteroporphyrin IX (D_{IX}) and Mg-deuteroporphyrin IX (MgD), monitoring tryptophan fluorescence quenching (see Experimental procedures for details).

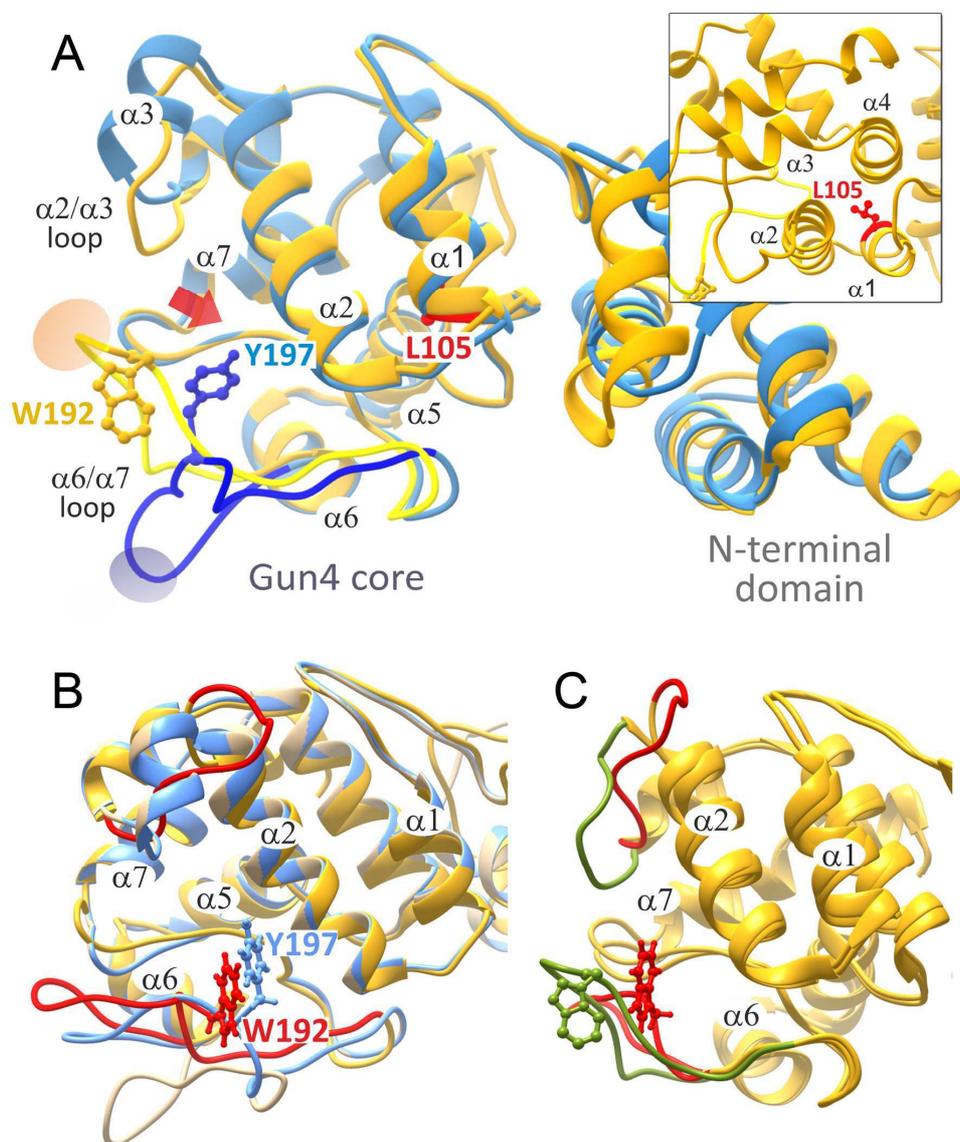
protein	D_{IX} K_d (μ M)	MgD K_d (μ M)
<i>Synechocystis</i> Gun4	3.83 ± 0.39	2.5 ± 0.09
<i>Synechocystis</i> W192A	7.32 ± 0.61	7.22 ± 0.82

Table II. Apparent binding constants of *Synechocystis* WT and W192A-Gun4 to the core MgCh complex. * Fitted to equation 1. † Fitted to equation 2 (see Experimental procedures for details).

protein	D_{IX} conc. (μ M)	V_{max} (μ M min^{-1})	K_{app} (μ M)	K_{iapp} (μ M)
Gun4	8*	0.444 ± 0.14	0.094 ± 0.059	0.540 ± 0.356
	0.8†	0.061 ± 0.005	0.043 ± 0.013	--
W192A	8*	0.529 ± 0.168	0.261 ± 0.133	0.523 ± 0.295
	0.8†	0.0328 ± 0.003	0.164 ± 0.063	--

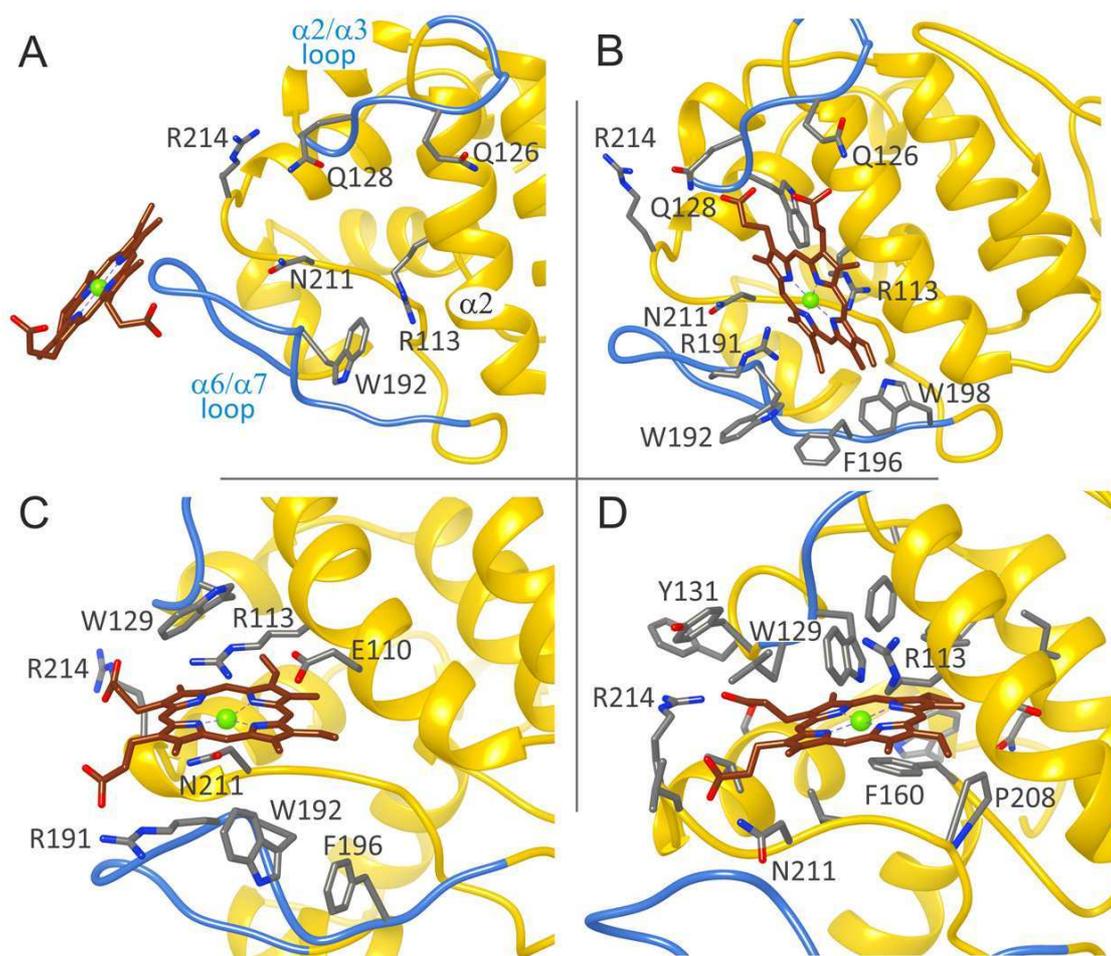
FIGURES

Figure 1



Role of porphyrin-binding by Gun4 protein

Figure 2



Role of porphyrin-binding by Gun4 protein

Figure 5

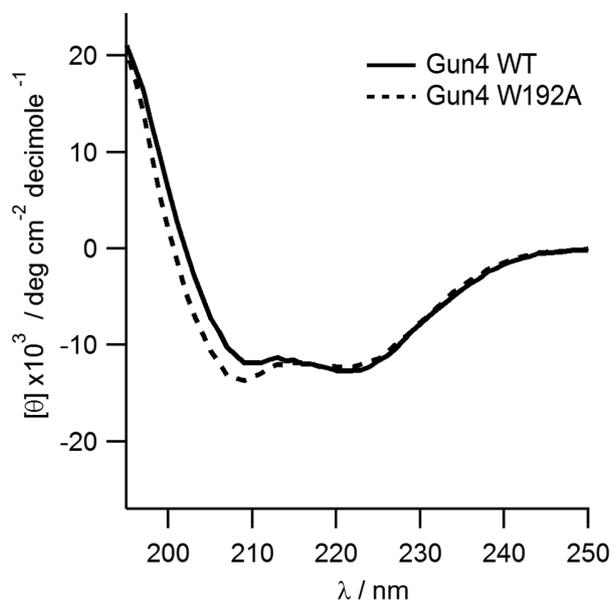
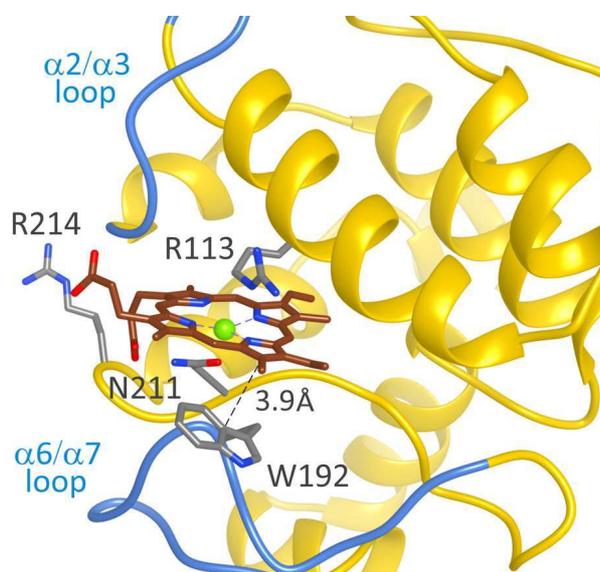


Figure 6



Role of porphyrin-binding by Gun4 protein

Figure 7

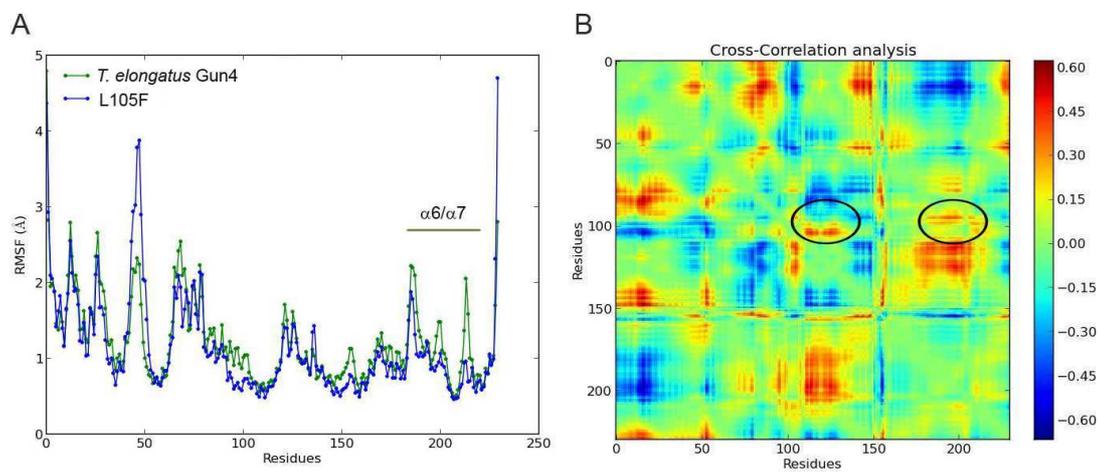
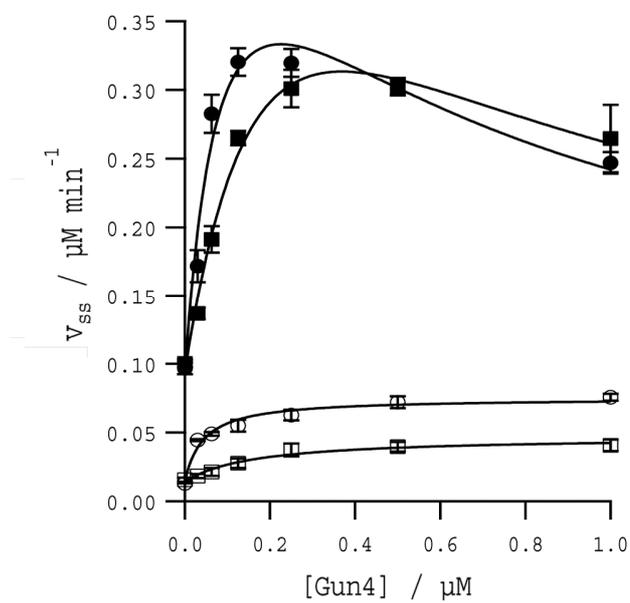
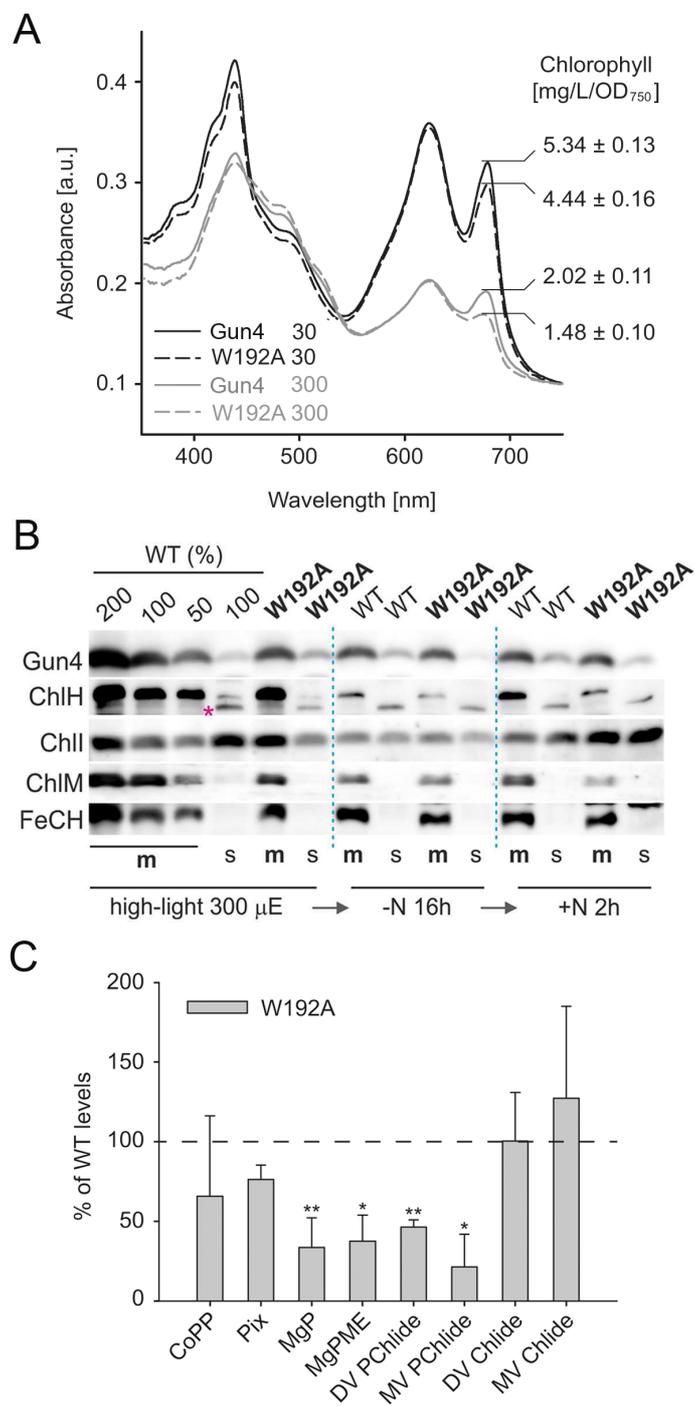


Figure 8



Role of porphyrin-binding by Gun4 protein

Figure 9



Role of porphyrin-binding by Gun4 protein

Figure 10

