Published in final edited form as:

J Am Chem Soc. 2007 January 17; 129(2): 387–394. doi:10.1021/ja066150c.

Proton Shuttles and Phosphatase Activity in Soluble Epoxide Hydrolase

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Abstract

Recently, a novel metal (Mg^{2+})-dependent phosphatase activity has been discovered in the N-terminal domain of the soluble epoxide hydrolase (sEH), opening a new branch of fatty acid metabolism and providing an additional site for drug targeting. Importantly, the sEH N-terminal fold belongs to the haloacid dehalogenase (HAD) superfamily, which comprises a vast majority of phosphotransferases. Herein we present the results of a computational study of the sEH phosphatase activity, which includes classical molecular dynamics (MD) simulations and mixed quantum mechanical/molecular mechanics (QM/MM) calculations. Based on experimental results, a two-step mechanism has been proposed and herein investigated: 1) phosphoenzyme intermediate formation; 2) phosphoenzyme intermediate hydrolysis. Building on our earlier work, we now provide a detailed description of the reaction mechanism for the whole catalytic cycle along with its free energy profile. The present computations suggest metaphosphate-like transition states for these phosphoryl transfers. They also reveal that the enzyme promotes water deprotonation and facilitates shuttling of protons via a metal-ligand connecting water-bridge (WB). These WB mediated proton shuttles are crucial for the activation of the solvent nucleophile and for the stabilization of the leaving-group. Moreover, due to the conservation of structural features in the N-terminal catalytic site of sEH and other members of the HAD superfamily, we suggest a generalization of our findings to these other metal-dependent phosphatases.

Introduction

Phosphatases are enzymes that catalyze the hydrolysis of phosphate esters from a variety of phosphorylated substrates, ranging from specific Thr/Ser residues of proteins to nonprotein substrates such as phospholipids. Phosphate ester hydrolysis is a hallmark of biochemical processes crucial in signal transduction pathways and cell cycle regulation¹⁻⁶. The mechanism of enzymatic phosphoryl transfers has been extensively studied in many different enzymes, such as GTPases⁷⁻¹⁰ and protein kinases^{11,12}. An extreme increase of the reaction rate by as much as $\sim 10^{21}$ has been reported and different possible pathways (dissociative, associative or concerted) as induced by the specific chemical environment^{13,14}.

In this study, we focus on a recently discovered phosphatase activity exhibited by the dual domain protein, human soluble epoxide hydrolase, sEH^{15,16} (sEH, Figure 1). The initially observed catalytic activity of sEH, namely the hydrolysis of epoxy fatty acids, occurs in the large C-terminal domain. The mechanism of the epoxide hydrolysis reaction is now well understood^{15,17} and the inhibition of sEH is a potential therapeutic strategy for the treatment

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of hypertension, cancer progression, and acute inflammation conditions¹⁸⁻²⁰. The novel metal (Mg^{2+})-dependent phosphatase activity of sEH, on the other hand, has been recently discovered in the smaller N-terminal domain^{21,22} and, as of yet, very little is known about its biological function. Crystal structures of human sEH provided evidence for bifunctional catalysis, showing a product complex with HPO_4^{2-} and a hexacoordinated Mg^{2+} ion bound in the active site of the N-terminal domain²³. The structures of murine²⁴ and human²³ sEH enzymes reveal that the N-terminal domain adopts an α/β fold homologous to that of the haloacid dehalogenase (HAD) superfamily, the majority of which is comprised of phosphotransferases. Structural comparison of the sEH phosphatase domain with several other proteins of the HAD superfamily reveals numerous conserved active site residues^{21,23-27} including a highly conserved nucleophilic aspartate residue (Asp9) and other residues (Asp11, Asp184, Asp185, Thr123 and Lys160) that surround the Mg^{2+} cofactor. The metal ion forms the center of a highly solvent exposed catalytic site situated in a ~ 14 Å long hydrophobic tunnel suitable to accommodate an aliphatic substrate. It has been suggested that a gene fusion event caused the linkage of functionally associated proteins, leading to the formation of the two-domain/bifunctional structure of the sEH protein^{24,28,29}.

Based on these findings, a two-step reaction scheme has been proposed, which describes the double phosphoryl transfer taking place in the sEH phosphatase²³: Step1) nucleophilic attack on the phosphate group of the phosphoester substrate by Asp9, and protonation of the leaving group by either an intervening water molecule or Asp11; Step2) hydrolysis of the phosphoenzyme intermediate via a nucleophilic attack at the scissile phosphorus atom by a water molecule (Scheme 1.).

Interestingly, biochemical experiments showing that phosphorylated lipids are optimal substrates for the N-terminal phosphatase activity²² suggest an in vivo circuit where phosphorylated diol products resulting from catalysis in the C-terminal domain are substrates for catalysis in the N-terminal activity¹⁶. Hence, the phosphatase activity of sEH may regulate its physiological function^{21,22}. Since polyisoprenyl phosphate esters such as farnesylidiphosphate and geranylgeranyldiphosphate are substrate for catalysis by the N-terminal domain, a possible physiological function in sterol synthesis or inflammation³⁰ is also suggested. Although further studies are needed to clarify its exact biological functions, it is possible that inhibitors of this activity may be useful in the treatment of inflammation, as recently demonstrated for inhibitors of the epoxide hydrolase activity of sEH¹⁸.

To follow-up on our recent communication³¹, in which we reported preliminary mechanistic details of Step1, here we describe the entire catalytic cycle with its free energy profile. In particular, we address previously ambiguous mechanistic aspects, such as the source of the proton that facilitates leaving group departure in Step1, the activation of the nucleophilic water that dephosphorylates Asp9 during Step2, the associative or dissociative character of the transition states for phosphoryl transfer, and the rate-determining chemical step in the catalytic cycle.

The chosen computational approach combines classical molecular dynamics (MD) and hybrid Car-Parrinello³² (CP) quantum mechanical/molecular mechanics (QM/MM) methods. The MD simulations provide an extensive relaxation of the system and a sampling of the protein conformational space; the QM/MM³³⁻³⁶ calculations allow the study of the phosphatase activity. Only the relevant active site residues, the metal cation and part of the substrate are treated at the quantum mechanical level, while the rest of the protein and the solvent waters are described at the classical MM level.

We provide first-principles-based interpretations of the experimental findings and propose a catalytic mechanism, which includes multi-event reactions that proficiently facilitate water

deprotonation and concerted proton transfers. The role of proton transfer in catalysis has been discussed extensively for several proteins such as carbonic anhydrase³⁷⁻⁴¹, bacteriorhodopsin⁴², photosynthetic reaction center^{43,44} and others (see for example refs. 45-47). It is accepted that the rate of localized proton transfers in the enzyme is principally modulated by electrostatic interactions in the active site³³. On the other hand, long-range proton transfers in biological systems are still poorly understood at a quantitative level, while it is commonly proposed that they occur through hydrogen bond wires formed by water molecules or protein side chains⁴⁸⁻⁵⁰. Yet, it is still debated if the number of water molecules and their structural organization in a bridging hydrogen bond wire can favor a concerted or step-wise mechanism for proton transfers^{37,41,51}. Here, we will use the term “proton shuttle” to distinguish the fast sequence of concerted proton transfers from step-wise proton transfers. We show that metal-substrate connecting water-bridges (WB) allow for efficient transfer of protons necessary for nucleophile formation and leaving group stabilization. These proton shuttles are concomitant with the enzymatic phosphoryl transfer reactions catalyzed by the sEH phosphatase. Finally, our findings can likely be generalized to the metal-dependent phosphatases belonging to the HAD superfamily.

Methods

Structural Model

Calculations are based on the crystallographic structure of Gomez et al. (PDB entry code 1VJ5, 2.35 Å resolution²³). This structure contains the sEH protein (555 residues) with Mg^{2+} - HPO_4^{2-} in the N-terminal domain, and the inhibitor *N*-cyclohexyl-*N'*-(4-iodophenyl)urea (CIU) in the C-terminal domain. Due to the system size and supported by experiments showing no correlation between the different catalytic activities in the two domains²¹, we considered in our study only the N-terminal domain (229 residues) including the *threo*-9-10-phosphonooxy-hydroxy-octadecanoic acid (PHO) substrate molecule⁵². This enzyme/substrate model is based on the binding mode proposed by Gomez et al.²³.

MD simulations

Molecular dynamics is used to equilibrate the solvated enzyme/substrate complex (~31,000 atoms) and provide a suitable model of the Michaelis complex for subsequent CP QM/MM calculations⁵³. The AMBER force field⁵⁴ is adopted for the simulations, while the NAMD package⁵⁵ is used for the MD engine. A ~10 ns simulation of MD is collected. The set up procedure and RMSD data are reported in Supplementary Information.

QM/MM MD simulations

The reaction paths are investigated using CP QM/MM simulations, where the reactive part of the complex – namely the Mg^{2+} cation and its six ligands Asp9, Asp185, the backbone-carbonyl of Asp11 (side chain not included due to its remote position from the reactive region), two/three water molecules and the phosphate group of the substrate molecule (see Figure 2, QM atoms highlighted) - is treated at the quantum mechanical level (DFT-BLYP 56,⁵⁷) and the remaining part at the classical mechanics level (AMBER force field). This approach has been shown to accurately describe a wide variety of enzymatic systems⁵⁸, in particular metallo-enzymes^{31,59} and DNA complexes⁶⁰. CP calculations have also been used to correctly predict relative pK_a values⁶¹⁻⁶³. The valence electrons are described by a basis set superposition error-free plane wave expansion up to a cutoff of 70 Ry. A $15 \times 15 \times 15 \text{ \AA}^3$ super cell is used for the QM part of the system. The interactions between valence electrons and ionic cores are described with norm-conserving Martins-Troullier pseudopotentials⁶⁴. Car-Parrinello molecular dynamics simulations are carried out with a time step of 0.12 fs (totally ~100 ps) and a fictitious electron mass of 900 au; constant temperature simulations are achieved by coupling the system with a Nosé-Hoover^{65,66} thermostat at 500 cm^{-1} frequency. The

interactions between the MM and QM regions are treated as in ^{ref. 53}. Also, a rigorous treatment of the electrostatic interaction between QM and MM regions is implemented as in ^{ref. 67}.

The protocol of the QM/MM calculations includes an initial equilibration of the MD starting snapshot: first, we performed a short simulation where only the MM part is free to move for ~500 steps, while the QM part is kept frozen. Then, the whole system is allowed to move and heat up to 300 K (~2 ps of free QM/MM dynamics). A configuration from the equilibrated simulations is used to initiate the constrained QM/MM calculations. The phosphate transfer reactions are described with a reaction coordinate (RC) defined as the difference between the length of the forming bond and that of the breaking bond. So-called blue-moon ensemble simulations were carried out of this system constrained at different values of the reaction coordinate, leaving all other degrees of freedom free to evolve. The catalytic reaction pathways are characterized in terms of (i) free energy profiles calculated using thermodynamic integration ⁶⁸; (ii) variation of critical bond lengths, averaged over the last ~1.5 ps of each constrained CP QM/MM simulation; (iii) variation of molecular charges along the reaction paths calculated by the ‘atoms in molecules’ partitioning scheme ⁶⁹. Charges are averaged over 20 statistically independent snapshots extracted for every point along the reaction coordinate from the constrained simulations. We stress that the estimation of the present free energy, which employs input from costly ab initio calculations, should be considered approximate. For a more accurate estimation of the enzymatic activation free energies, several independent paths should be considered ⁷⁰, which unfortunately is currently beyond the available computational resources.

Results and Discussion

Step1: Phosphoenzyme Formation

The free energy surface (FES) of the first step of the enzymatic reaction was computed using constraint dynamics, as explained in the method section. Constrained CP QM/MM simulations of 3~4 ps were performed for 14 points of different reaction coordinate (RC) values, ranging from +1.95 to -1.95 Å. The RC was taken to be the difference between the length of breaking and forming bonds ($RC = r1 - r2$, Figure 2, label in **R**). This RC is the minimal and natural choice describing the chemical reaction ^{71,72}, while all other degrees of freedom are left free.

The shape of the resulting free energy surface (see Figure 3) is characterized by two minima – the reactant state (**R**) constituting the Michaelis-Menten complex and the phosphoenzyme intermediate state (**INTa**) including the phosphorylated Asp9 - separated by a single TS maximum (**TS1**). Simulations of the initial reactant state **R** ($RC = -1.95$ Å) shows a well-structured H-bond network that stabilizes the Mg^{2+} -centered catalytic site. It includes a hydrogen bond wire formed by water molecule WAT1, which is bridging the Mg^{2+} -bound water WAT2 and the oxygen O_1 of the substrate leaving group ($Mg^{2+} \dots WAT2 \dots WAT1 \dots O_1$). The spontaneous insertion of WAT1 between WAT2 and O_1 was observed during both unconstrained CP QM/MM dynamics ³¹ and classical MD, facilitated by the high solvent exposure of the catalytic site region.

Upon increasing the RC from **R** ($RC = -1.95$ Å) to **TS1** ($RC = -0.6$ Å), the forming bond $r2$ shortens from ~3.75 Å to ~2.65 Å. The length of the bond being broken, $r1$, increases simultaneously to ~2.05 Å (as shown in Figure 3).

At $RC \approx -0.5$ Å (average value validated after a reverse procedure along the same RC) a spontaneous key event occurs: the advanced cleavage of $r1$ (~2.21 Å) produces a rise in the basicity of O_1 , which initiates a proton shuttle involving a double proton transfer along the H-bond wire formed by WAT2-WAT1- O_1 (see **TS1** in Figure 2); (i) first, O_1 receives a proton

from WAT1, forming a good leaving group (SUB-O₁H) by saturating the negative charge on O₁, (PT1 in Figure 2) (ii) immediately after, the incipient hydroxide ion, now bridging SUB-O₁H and WAT2, accepts a proton from WAT2 (PT2 in Figure 2). This second proton transfer forms again a bridging water molecule (WAT1), while transforming WAT2 into a hydroxide ion stabilized by Mg²⁺ coordination. The stronger metal-ligand electrostatic interaction is evidenced by distance d1 (Figure 3), which decreases from its initial average of ~2.25 Å to ~2.05 Å after the WB-mediated proton shuttle. At RC = -0.4 Å, *r*1 rapidly elongates leading to its definitive cleavage, and a narrow interval (-0.4 ≤ RC ≤ 0 Å, orange area in Figure 3) is reached in which the average constraint force is essentially equal to zero, indicating a flat TS region. Initially, the breaking of *r*1 causes a moderate increase of *r*2 as well, then followed by values where progressively *r*1 and *r*2 reach the same length at RC = 0 Å (*r*1 = *r*2 ≈ 2.56 Å). Hence, the phosphoryl transfer reaction shows a metaphosphate-like species in the TS region.

At RC = 0.2 Å, the average constraint force changes sign, indicating that the system is falling into the first product well (i.e. phosphoenzyme intermediate **INTa**). Further sampling of the RC from ~0.4 Å, to ~2.0 Å shows the formation of the **INTa** meta-stable state where the average constraint force is again equal to zero. At this local minimum of the FES, *r*2 is equal to ~1.83 Å, while *r*1 has reached a value of ~3.83 Å (Figure 3).

Step 2: Phosphoenzyme Hydrolysis

The second phosphoryl transfer reaction was simulated after removal of the unphosphorylated lipid substrate (SUB-O₁H) from the final state of the first step, assuming its departure after the phosphoenzyme formation, followed by water molecules filling the remaining cavity. Firstly, the system is again equilibrated by classical MD, keeping the QM atoms fixed as in the **INTa** structure. After ~300 picoseconds, a snapshot has been selected to initiate the constrained CPQM/MM calculations. High similarity of the charge distribution in the catalytic site (further discussed hereafter) before and after substrate removal and re-equilibration indicates that these modifications can be expected to have only very minor effects. One additional water molecule (WAT3) was selected to be in the QM region for the second reaction step (Figure 2, **INTb**). The same type of RC (RC = *r*2-*r*1, Figure 2) and procedure as applied to the previous step is used to now investigate Step2 (RC ranging from -1.75 to +1.75 Å).

The FES of the phosphoenzyme hydrolysis is characterized by the starting phosphoenzyme intermediate structure **INTb**, the transition state **TS2** and the final product **P** (see Figure 4). The **INTb** point (RC = -1.75 Å) includes the nucleophilic water WAT3, in a plausible orientation for attacking the scissile phosphorus atom. The H-bond network is stable, as well as the Mg²⁺-centered catalytic site, while a new metal-substrate connecting hydrogen bond wire is formed: WAT1 is now bridging the Mg²⁺-bound OH⁻ ion and WAT3.

Upon increasing the RC from -1.75 Å to -0.26 Å, the length *r*1 of the bond to be formed progressively decreases, from ~3.65 Å to ~2.80 Å. The breaking bond is cleaved at RC = -0.80 Å, where *r*2 reaches ~2.30 Å, indicating a nominal stability of the phosphoenzyme intermediate **73**, which releases the PO₃⁻ group rather easily. The breaking P-O bond length *r*2 continues to increase until RC = 0.0 Å, where it reaches a value of ~3.0 Å. Note the steep increase of *r*2 at -0.52 ≤ RC ≤ -0.26 Å, which causes a temporary increase of *r*1 as well; the latter however continues to decrease after this interval.

At 0.0 ≤ RC ≤ +0.26 Å (orange area in Figure 4), the average constraint force is essentially zero, indicating that the TS region is reached. Within this interval, *r*2 maintains a value of ~3.0 Å, while *r*1 decreases to ~2.8 Å at RC = +0.26 Å. At RC ≈ +0.4 Å (average value validated after reverse procedure along the same RC), a second proton shuttle occurs in the reverse direction with respect to the proton shuttle observed in Step1; that is, a late deprotonation of the nucleophile WAT3 is facilitated by the proton acceptor represented by the hydroxide ion

bound to Mg^{2+} . First, the OH^- receives a proton from the bridging WAT1 (PT3 in Figure 2); immediately after, the incipient OH^- ion, now bridging WAT2 and WAT3, receives a proton from WAT3 (PT4 in Figure 2). The increased nucleophilicity of WAT3, transformed into OH^- , facilitates its attack at the scissile phosphorus atom, as shown in Figure 4 by the sharp decrease of r_1 (and even of r_2 due to its coupling to r_1 via the constrained RC). The initial, Mg^{2+} coordinated, OH^- ligand is transformed into WAT2, causing an increase of distance d_1 from its initial average value of $\sim 2.05 \text{ \AA}$ to $\sim 2.25 \text{ \AA}$.

At $\text{RC} = +0.52 \text{ \AA}$, the average constraint force changes sign, indicating that the system has crossed the TS and can evolve downhill toward the product state. At $\text{RC} = +1.10 \text{ \AA}$ the product state is reached in which the HO-PO_3^{2-} group is formed. Upon removal of the constraint, the system falls further into the product well, taking a final value of $\text{RC} \approx +1.75 \text{ \AA}$ with $r_1 \sim 1.75 \text{ \AA}$, and $r_2 \sim 3.70 \text{ \AA}$.

We emphasize that each proton shuttle, herein described, occurs spontaneously and completely (i.e., without step-wise intermediate states). Although we cannot definitely rule out a possible step-wise mechanism for the observed sequences of proton transfers (PT1, PT2, PT3 and PT4), our calculations indicate the concerted mechanism as a favorable one for proton transfers in sEH phosphatase, at least for this level of theory.

Charge distribution along the reactions

Both reaction paths can be monitored by charge variations of relevant molecular moieties, as reported in Figure 5. At the initial state **R**, charge transfer effects play a role at the metal center: Mg^{2+} cation ($q=1.77$) has accepted electron density from the Asp ligands and $\text{SUB-O}_1\text{-PO}_3^{2-}$ group ($q=-1.75$). Starting from $\text{RC} \approx -0.8 \text{ \AA}$, a considerable amount of charge is transferred along the breaking P-O bond r_1 ; the scissile PO_3^- group gains electron density from the leaving substrate ($\sim -0.65 \rightarrow \sim -1.00$) evidencing the formation of the metaphosphate-like transition state. This local charge redistribution at the leaving group primes the first proton shuttle event at $\text{RC} \approx -0.5$: SUB-O_1 receives a proton from WAT1 (PT1), followed by the transformation of WAT2 in a hydroxide ion (PT2) stabilized by the favorable electrostatic interaction with Mg^{2+} . At **TS1**, the PO_3^- as well as the other moieties conserve their molecular charge until **INTa** formation at $\text{RC} \approx 2.0 \text{ \AA}$, where the transfer of charge from the PO_3^- to Asp9 accompanies and promotes the formation of the new bond r_2 .

In Step2, at the initial **INTb** state, the charge distribution is virtually equal to that of the final **INTa** of Step1. Thus, the substitution of the substrate by water molecules do not perturb the system. Upon reaching **TS2**, significant changes in the charge distribution accompany the second phosphoryl transfer: the PO_3^- group shows the formation of a metaphosphate-like transition state through a gain of negative charge ($\sim -0.90 \rightarrow \sim -1.10$), partially counterbalanced by the charge increase of Asp9 ($\sim -0.95 \rightarrow \sim -0.85$). Just after **TS2**, a relevant charge transfer interaction between PO_3^- and the approaching WAT3 primes the second proton shuttle (PT3-PT4) characterized by the final formation of the Mg^{2+} -bound WAT2. Finally, the system reaches the products state in which the electronic charge distribution recovers values similar to that in **R**.

It is interesting to notice the nearly perfect mirror symmetry of the redistribution of electronic charge along the two steps of the reaction (Figure 5). For instance, the Mg^{2+} charge shows a progressive decrease along Step1, and a mirror-like trend during Step2. The charge symmetry drives the reaction to a symmetrical dynamics of the catalytic cycle: the proton shuttle events occur just before **TS1** and just after **TS2**, respectively along Step1 and Step2. The charge transfer effects taking place along the breaking-forming bonds r_1 and r_2 seem to play the major role in promoting the proton shuttles.

Energetic of the enzymatic reactions

The free energy profiles of the two phosphoryl transfer reactions were computed by integration of the average forces of constraint as described in the method section, and plotted in Figure 3 for Step1 and in Figure 4 for Step2. The free energy barrier determined for the first pathway **R** → **TS1** → **INTa** is $\sim 19 \pm 0.5$ kcal mol⁻¹. Although there is some uncertainty related to the calculated free energy, it is interesting to note that this value agrees well with the experimental number related to the whole catalytic activity, which is ~ 18 kcal mol⁻¹ calculated according to the enzymatic reaction theory using the $k_{\text{cat}} = 0.35$ s⁻¹ reported for the substrate used in our study²². Formation of **INTa** is endothermic by 10 kcal mol⁻¹ with respect to the reactant complex **R**, with a somewhat larger uncertainty of ~ 3 kcal mol⁻¹ due to larger fluctuations in the force of constraint in the simulations of the last part of the first step. The free energy barrier of the second pathway **INTb** → **TS2** → **P** is $\sim 12 \pm 1.5$ kcal mol⁻¹, which compares well with the value of ~ 10.7 kcal mol⁻¹ obtained for the hydrolysis of acetylphosphate¹⁴. Although the relative barrier heights would indicate Step1 as the rate-limiting chemical step, the free energies of **TS1** and **TS2** with respect to the reactant complex are more or less equal. However, a quantitative comparison is hindered by the unknown energy difference between **INTa** and **INTb** (from the replacement of the leaving substrate group by solvent water molecules in the catalytic site), which can be expected to shift the free energy profile of Step2 with the respect to that of Step1 by a few kcal mol⁻¹. If we are allowed to assume that the two steps are sufficiently disconnected by the relatively slow diffusive process of substrate removal from the cavity after Step1, **INTb** can be considered a new equilibrated reference state from which the system needs to be re-activated in order to reach **TS2** and undergo Step2. As the second activation of ~ 12 kcal mol⁻¹ is much smaller than the first activation of ~ 19 kcal mol⁻¹, the first step can be considered to be the rate-limiting chemical step of the overall process.

No pentavalent phosphorane intermediate such as that observed in β -phosphoglucomutase⁷⁴⁻⁷⁸ was observed along Step1 and Step2 in these computations, in agreement with previous computational studies of phosphoryl transfer in HIV-1 integrase and cyclin-dependent kinase 2 (CDK2)^{79,80}. Both *r1* and *r2* do not show values resembling a phosphorane species in the TS regions. Although such an intermediate cannot definitely be ruled out, due to the flat nature of those regions, it would significantly affect neither the reaction profile nor the reaction rate⁸¹, since its energy could only be slightly lower (~ 1 -2 Kcal mol⁻¹) of that of the surrounding TSs.

To appreciate the role of the WB-mediated proton shuttles in forming a better nucleophile and leaving group, we have investigated alternative pathways that start from the same initial configurations used for studying Step1 and Step2. Importantly, in these alternative pathways (referred as Step1-b and Step2-b hereafter), the WB molecule is manually removed. We also apply a restraint on distance *d1*, so that both WAT2 (along Step1-b) and OH⁻ (along Step2-b) maintain their coordination to the Mg²⁺ cation. Thus, we induce the system towards reaction paths in which the formation of a favorable hydrogen bond wire, such that present along Step1 and Step2, is impossible.

Along the alternative pathways, Step1-b shows a similar phosphoryl transfer mechanism as found in Step1. As expected, no proton shuttle is involved in the formation of a good leaving group. This mechanism has a free energy barrier of ~ 36 kcal mol⁻¹, which corresponds to a reaction rate that is ~ 12 orders of magnitude slower than the pathway including the proton shuttle. Also along Step2-b, the lack of a WB proton shuttle strongly discourages the reaction. Moreover, without the WB molecule WAT1, the catalytic site undergoes major structural rearrangements that lead to the loss of coordination around the metal ion. In other words, even though the system can reach the **TS2** region, in which WAT3 attacks the scissile phosphorus atom with a barrier of ~ 24 kcal mol⁻¹ (~ 9 orders of magnitude slower than the WB-mediated

pathway), the absent deprotonation of the nucleophile WAT3 prevents the formation of the final reaction product. To avoid the latter problem, we have alternatively simulated the direct attack of a hydroxide ion that could have been formed by early WAT3 deprotonation, assuming the formation of WAT2 in **INTb** (Supp. Info). However, if a free OH⁻ ion is present in the catalytic site, we observed its immediate spontaneous protonation by WAT2, again forming our starting structure **INTb** in Step2.

The enzymatic barrier can be compared to that of the phosphoryl transfer reaction in water, for which a wealth of literature is available^{71,81-88}. For our case, the study of Akola and Jones⁷¹ is the most relevant one since it concerns the hydrolysis of the Mg-complexed methyl thiphosphate in water, studied by means of CPMD calculations. The barriers found for different mechanisms (dissociative and associative) are ~35-40 kcal mol⁻¹, which compare well with barriers reported by Florian and Warshel⁸¹ for methyl phosphate hydrolysis in water (~40 kcal mol⁻¹). Thus, these studies further show the efficiency of the enzymatic mechanism herein proposed.

In summary, within the limited/allowed size of our QM system and the necessarily restricted sampling, this study demonstrates the significance of metal-substrate connected H-bond wires via WB molecules, which enable the efficient proton shuttle events involved in nucleophile and leaving group stabilization and that are concomitant with the phosphoryl transfer reactions catalyzed in sEH. The crucial catalytic role of the Mg²⁺ cation, essentially performed through its electrostatic and chelating effects and its ability to reduce pK_a of the first Mg²⁺ solvation shell by several units⁸⁹, facilitates water deprotonation giving origin to the proton shuttle events. Thus, as a general rule, we underline the significance to include explicit solvation waters in the QM calculations in studying phosphoryl transfers. In this regard, it is important to mention that the pivotal study of Florian and Warshel⁸¹, as well as recent reconsiderations of the reaction mechanism of phosphate hydrolysis by Klahn and coauthors⁷⁰, could not observe such WB-mediated proton shuttles concomitant to phosphoryl transfers since these studies do not include solvation waters in the system.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have presented a computational investigation of the novel phosphatase activity recently discovered in the N-terminal domain of the bifunctional sEH enzyme. Importantly, this domain includes conserved catalytic residues that participate in phosphatase activity in several other proteins of the HAD superfamily^{21,23-27}. In particular, we have examined the two phosphoryl transfer reactions of phosphoenzyme formation (Step1) and phosphoenzyme hydrolysis (Step2) that make up the catalytic cycle of the phosphatase activity in sEH.

Both steps show an in-line nucleophilic substitution presenting a rather dissociative character, particularly pronounced in Step2. No evidence of a phospharane species in the TS regions is found, but instead a planar metaphosphate-like transition state that well resembles crystal structures of TS analogues^{90,91} is observed. The computed free energy barriers are in good agreement with experimental values, suggesting Step1 (~19 kcal mol⁻¹) as the rate-determining step of the catalytic cycle.

Chemical steps in phosphoryl transfer reactions are the protonation of the leaving group and the deprotonation of the attacking nucleophile. For sEH however, the proton donor and acceptor in these steps were still unclear until now. In our simulations, we find that the role of the proton donor in Step1 is performed by a water molecule acidified by coordination to Mg²⁺. Because of its favorable position with respect to the leaving group of the substrate, which docks via the phosphoryl group to the same metal ion, the water ligand is connected to the leaving group via a short hydrogen bond wire involving a single bridging water molecule in the solvent exposed

cavity. A fast proton shuttle along this H-bond wire creates a favorable leaving group that departs concomitantly with P-O bond cleavage. In Step2, the reverse process is observed, as now the Mg^{2+} coordinated hydroxide ion accepts the proton from the attacking solvent molecule in a fast shuttle again via a single WB molecule. The facilitating proton shuttles were observed spontaneously and the phosphoryl transfer is reversible (showing a minimal hysteresis), indicating that the barrier for the proton transfer is very small. Quantum effects such as zero-point motion and tunneling, which were neglected in our calculations, would likely reduce such a barrier even further.

In conclusion, we have uncovered the efficient and elegant way in which the sEH enzyme performs a highly concerted multi-event reaction sequence to accelerate phosphoryl transfer reactions. Overall, an important contribution in the enhancement of the catalytic efficiency comes from the nucleophile and leaving group stabilization via WB-mediated proton shuttles, mostly induced by the electrostatic effects of the metal ion. In fact, repression of these proton shuttles in our simulations leads to inhibition of the phosphatase activity. Due to the conservation of active site residues in the N-terminal domain of sEH and other proteins of the HAD superfamily, we suggest a generalization of the mechanism presented herein to these metal-dependent phosphatases. Knowledge of TS geometries and charge distribution are also of practical interest, since it might eventually provide a blueprint for the design of specific transition state inhibitors.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the NIH for financial support and the Pittsburgh Supercomputer Center (PSC) for computing time.

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Abbreviation footnotes

sEH	soluble epoxide hydrolase
HAD	haloacid dehalogenase
WB	water-bridge

Figure 1.

Cartoon of the sEH N-terminal domain fold. Secondary structures are colored in yellow (B-sheets), violet (alpha-helices) and green (loops); the linker is colored in red. The orange sphere indicates the Mg^{2+} cofactor present in the active site, while coordinating ligands and the substrate molecule are depicted in stick representation and colored based on atom-type.

Figure 2.

Selected snapshots taken from our computer simulations of the two investigated phosphoryl transfers comprising the catalytic cycle. Top: nucleophilic attack of Asp9 at the Mg²⁺-coordinated phosphoryl group, with substrate cleavage and phosphoenzyme intermediate formation INTa. In the middle, the transition state structure TS1 showing the concomitant proton shuttle (labeled PT1 and PT2) from a Mg²⁺-coordinated water molecule to the leaving group oxygen via a bridging solvent water. Bottom: second phosphoryl transfer from the phospho-Asp9 to one attacking solvent water, leading to the product state, with now a second proton shuttle (labeled PT3 and PT4 in TS2) traveling in the reverse direction to create the nucleophile OH⁻.

Figure 3.

Free energy profile (top) and selected average bond distances (bottom) along the first catalytic step of phosphoenzyme formation (INTa). Bond distance labels as in Figure 2; notably r1 and r2 the breaking and forming P-O bond lengths respectively. The proton shuttle occurs at RC $\approx$ -0.5 Å (vertical dashed line), just before the system reaches the TS plateau (orange region). Note the shortening of the Mg²⁺-ligand distance, d1, upon proton donation and transfer along the H-bond wire (d2/d3 and d4/d5 crossing).

Figure 4.

Free energy profile (top) and selected average bond distances (bottom) along the second catalytic step. Bond distance labels as in Figure 2 (INTb panel). Here the proton shuttle (dashed vertical line) occurs in the reverse direction (note the d2/d3 and d4/d5 crossing) after the TS plateau (orange region).

Figure 5.

Average charges of selected molecular moieties in the active site along the first (left panel) and second (right panel) phosphoryl transfer reaction (see color coding in Figure). The metaphosphate-like transition state formation along both transfers is shown by the temporary increase of negative charge of the PO_3^- group (red line) along the reaction. The crossing of blue and violet lines shows the charge transfer along the H-bond wire during the proton shuttles (dashed vertical lines).

Scheme 1.

Mechanism of phosphatase activity in sEH proposed by Gomez G. A. et al (23), and investigated in our study: Step1) Phosphoenzyme intermediate formation via a nucleophilic attack at the phosphate group of the phosphoester substrate by Asp9; Step2) Phosphoenzyme hydrolysis via a nucleophilic attack of a water molecule at the scissile phosphorus atom.