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► To cite this version:

René Ullrich, Christiane Liers, Sylvia Schimpke, Martin Hofrichter. Purification of homogeneous forms of fungal peroxygenase. *Biotechnology Journal*, 2009, 4 (11), pp.1619. 10.1002/biot.200900076 . hal-00498913

HAL Id: hal-00498913

<https://hal.science/hal-00498913>

Submitted on 9 Jul 2010

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Journal:	<i>Biotechnology Journal</i>
Manuscript ID:	biot.200900076.R2
Wiley - Manuscript type:	Technical Report
Date Submitted by the Author:	02-Jun-2009
Complete List of Authors:	Ullrich, René; International Graduate School Zittau, Environmental Biotechnology Liers, Christiane; International Graduate School Zittau, Environmental Biotechnology Schimpke, Sylvia; University of Technology Dresden, Biotechnology Center and Center for Regenerative Therapies Hofrichter, Martin; International Graduate School Zittau, Environmental Biotechnology
Main Keywords:	
All Keywords:	
Keywords:	protein purification, isoform, peroxygenases



Technical Report

Purification of homogeneous forms of fungal peroxygenase

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Keywords: *Agrocybe aegerita* / Isoform / Peroxygenases / Protein purification

Abbreviations: **AaP**, *Agrocybe aegerita* peroxygenase; **FPLC**, fast protein liquid chromatography; **IEF**, preparative isoelectric focusing

Extracellular peroxygenase from the agaric fungus *Agrocybe aegerita* is a versatile biocatalyst that oxygenates various substrates by means of hydrogen peroxide. The enzyme is routinely produced in suspensions of soybean meal and has until now been purified by several steps of fast protein liquid chromatography (FPLC) using different ion exchangers. The final protein fraction had a molecular mass of 46 kDa but still consisted of several incompletely separated proteins with slightly differing isoelectric points (pI 5.2, 5.6, 6.1), probably representing differently glycosylated isoforms. This made it difficult to further purify the individual protein forms. Since homogeneous protein fractions are a pre-requisite for X-ray crystallography and specific structure-function studies, an appropriate FPLC procedure was developed starting with pre-purification of crude peroxygenase on SP Sepharose followed by chromatofocusing on a Mono P column and elution with a pH gradient. Three sufficiently separated main protein peaks were eluted from the Mono P column and confirmed to be distinct forms of aromatic peroxygenase with different pI/s. All A.

aegerita peroxygenase forms oxygenated toluene and naphthalene and no catalytic differences were observed between them. We tested also two devices for preparative isoelectric focusing (Rotofor, IsoPrime systems) for peroxygenase separation but resolution and protein recovery were not sufficient.

1 Introduction

The agaric mushroom *Agrocybe aegerita* produces a secretory heme-thiolate protein (*A. aegerita* peroxygenase, AaP) that can be regarded as a functional hybrid of peroxidases and cytochrome P450 monooxygenases [1–3]. The enzyme is able to oxygenate (epoxidize, hydroxylate), brominate and oxidize a wide range of aromatic and aliphatic substrates and hence may be one of the most versatile oxidoreductases known so far [4–6]. The fungus secretes considerable amounts of this peroxygenase particularly in soybean meal suspension [1]. However, the purification of AaP is laborious and requires several steps of ultrafiltration and fast protein liquid chromatography (FPLC) using different ion exchangers to get rid of the soy proteins and peptides. The final enzyme fractions obtained show one mass band (46 kDa) on SDS-PAGE, but still consist of two to six different proteins (three major forms along with a varying number of minor ones) with p/s between 4.9 and 5.7 (differences in pI 0.1–0.8) [1]. However, specific analyses such as X-ray diffraction studies or comparative kinetic studies require the preparation of homogeneous protein fractions, *i.e.*, the three major AaP forms must be purified to homogeneity [7].

The use of high-resolution Mono Bead resins in ion exchange chromatography (*e.g.*, Mono Q, Mono S) is a well established and has been successfully applied for the purification of protein isoforms and isoenzymes [8–10]. The application of FPLC using a pH gradient, the so-called chromatofocusing, has been successfully used for

separating antibodies and their fragments, as well as peptides and oligonucleotides. However, there are only a few articles describing the purification of extracellular fungal enzymes by chromatofocusing [11–15].

Preparative isoelectric focusing (IEF) in buffered liquids is another established method for purifying similar protein forms and is usually performed using a multi-compartment electrolyzer or a Rotofor cell device [16–20]. Both methods are tricky and time consuming, and have been applied mainly for the purification of peptides, protein fragments and small proteins, polynucleotides or intracellular bacterial enzymes [20–23]. Reports on the separation and fractionation of different forms of fungal secretory proteins by these preparative IEF devices are rarely found in the literature [18].

In the present work, we studied the separation of different peroxygenase proteins (AaP isoforms) by preparative IEF and chromatofocusing using pH gradients with the aim of obtaining homogeneous protein fractions for further comparative studies. Both methods are known to be sensitive to slightly varying surface charges of proteins, and hence may be the methods of choice for the successful separation of quite similar peroxygenase molecules.

2 Materials and methods

2.1 Enzyme assay and chemicals

Activity of peroxygenase was determined in 1-mL cuvettes by following the oxidation of veratryl alcohol into veratraldehyde ($\epsilon_{310} = 9.3 \text{ mM}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-1}$) in 50 mM sodium citrate-phosphate buffer at pH 7 [1]. All chemicals used were of the highest purity available and were obtained from Sigma-Aldrich (Weinheim, Germany) and Merck (Darmstadt, Germany).

2.2 Preparation of protein crude extract

All purification experiments were started from crude AaP produced by the Black poplar mushroom, *A. aegerita* strain TM A1 (strain deposited at DSMZ no. 22459). Production was carried out in a 5-L stirred-tank bioreactors (Biostat B, Braun Biotech International GmbH, Melsungen, Germany) containing a complex liquid medium based on soybean meal [1]. Culture liquid (4 L) was harvested just after the activity had reached its maximum level (about 1500 U/L). The fungal mycelium was removed by filtration (filter GF6; Schleicher & Schuell, Dassel, Germany) and the enzyme-containing liquid was concentrated 60-fold by two steps of ultrafiltration using a tangential-flow cassette system (Omega Minisette™, cut-off 10 kDa, Pall Corporation Hauppauge, NY, USA) and a 150-mL stirred cell system (10 kDa cut-off polysulphone membrane, Pall Life Sciences, Dreieich, Germany).

2.3 Protein purification by ion exchange chromatography

For subsequent protein separation, the crude AaP was pre-purified by FPLC using an ÄKTA system (GE HealthCare Europe GmbH, Freiburg, Germany) fitted with the strong cation exchanger SP Sepharose FF (column XK 26/20, GE HealthCare). Proteins were eluted with a linear gradient of 0–0.6 M NaCl in 10 mM sodium acetate buffer (pH 4.75) at a flow rate of 13 mL/min⁻¹ (modified according to [1]). AaP-containing fractions were pooled, concentrated and dialyzed against 10 mM sodium acetate (pH 5.0; 10 kDa cut-off polysulphone membrane, Pall Life Sciences). This pre-purified AaP fraction was afterwards used for all further separation studies.

In a first approach, we attempted to separate the AaP proteins by ion exchange on Mono Bead™ columns using either strong cation (Mono S, 5 mm × 50 mm, pH 4.5)

or strong anion (Mono Q, 5 mm × 50 mm, pH 7.0) exchangers. Separations were carried out with sodium acetate (10 mM) as solvent and an increasing concentration of NaCl (0–0.3 M) for elution.

2.4 Protein purification by preparative IEF

IEF separation was done with an IsoPrime multi-chambered electrofocusing unit (Hoefer Scientific Instruments, San Francisco, CA, USA). The purification module consisted of eight chambers separated by seven isoelectric membranes of pre-determined pH. The polyacrylamide (5%) membranes were reinforced by glass fiber filters (GF53, Schleicher & Schuell) and contained covalently bound acrylamido buffers (*pI* select, Fluka Chemie GmbH, Buchs, Switzerland), which imparted a definite pK_a value to each membrane. Membrane preparation was performed according to the manufacturer's instructions using the software program Doctor-pH (Hoefer Scientific Instruments) that determined the required concentration of the acrylamido buffers for adjusting the desired pH. Seven slightly differing pH values (5.00, 5.37, 5.53, 5.65, 5.73, 5.85, 6.00) were chosen, covering the whole *pI* range of possible AaP forms (previously determined by analytical IEF [1]). After assembling the membranes, a pre-run was carried out at 11 °C and 4 W constant power supply (3000 V, 20–25 mA, 3.5 mL/min) with deionized water to establish the pH gradient within the membranes. After removing the pre-run water, the protein sample was placed into the central chamber. The outer chambers were filled with the corresponding electrolytes. The anode buffer was 5 mM acetic acid and the catholyte was 5 mM histidine. Separation runs were done in the constant power mode (4 W) resulting in currents up to 25 mA with a flow rate of 2.5 mL/min. To improve protein separation and recovery, running conditions were varied in following

ranges: phase 1 (0.5–2 h, 650–800 V), phase 2 (1–1.5 h, 1000–1500 V), phase 3 (0.5–25 h, 1500–3000 V).

Further separation experiments by preparative IEF were carried out with a Rotofor unit (Bio-Rad, Hercules, CA, USA). The enzyme solution was mixed with ampholytes (pH 4–7, Fluka Chemie), which then generated a linear pH gradient in the electrical field of the focusing chamber. A pre-run of the system was performed (5 min, 5 W) with deionized water prior to loading the protein sample. After injection of the enzyme solution through the inlet of the sample chamber, the run was performed at a constant power of 4 W and 450 V for 4 h. To achieve sufficient separation, the concentration of electrolyte buffers (500 mM acetic acid pH 2.2; 100 mM histidine pH 7.6; 500 mM propionic acid pH 2.6; 100 mM histidine pH 7.6) and of ampholytes (2–4%) was varied. Finally the protein fractions were collected by applying a vacuum to the separation chamber. All active fractions were later analyzed by analytical IEF.

2.5 Protein purification by chromatofocusing

This method was also accomplished using the ÄKTA-FPLC system mentioned above but applying a pH instead of a salt gradient. SP Sepharose-pre-purified protein was separated on a chromatofocusing column containing the mixed anion exchanger Mono P (5 mm × 200 mm, GE HealthCare). The column was pre-equilibrated with 25 mM Bis-Tris-HCl buffer (pH 7) and the protein solution loaded onto the column by a sample pump (GE Healthcare Europe). The bound AaP protein was eluted with a pH gradient established by 10% Polybuffer 74 (pH 4.0, GE HealthCare) at a flow rate of 1 mL/min. Active fractions were collected with an auto-sampler, pooled and analyzed by analytical IEF.

2.6 Analytical IEF and protein determination

To determine the purity of protein and to evaluate the success of separation, the different protein fractions were electrophoretically analyzed using a Mini-Cell electrophoresis system (XCell Sure Lock™ Invitrogen, Karlsruhe, Germany) and Novex pre-cast IEF gels (pH 3–7, Invitrogen). Electrophoretical separation was carried out according to the manufacturer's protocol over 2.5 h at up to 6 mA (500 V limit). Protein bands were visualized with the Colloidal Blue Staining Kit from Invitrogen.

Protein concentration was determined by the method of Bradford using the Roti®-Nanoquant Protein Assay Kit (Roth, Karlsruhe, Germany) with bovine serum albumin H4 (Roth) as the standard.

2.7 Toluene and naphthalene oxidation by different AaP fractions

The major AaP fractions obtained after Mono P separation were compared with respect to their ability to oxygenate toluene and naphthalene [3]. Reactions were performed with 0.08 nmol of each AaP fraction and 1000 μ M substrate in 1.5-mL HPLC vials (total reaction volume 1 mL) in potassium phosphate buffer (10 mM, pH 6.8) under continuous supply of H₂O₂ (KDS 100, KD Scientific, Holliston, MA, USA) at rates of 200 nmol/min over 10 min [6]. In the case of toluene, the reaction mixture contained in addition 5 mM ascorbic acid to prevent further oxidation of cresols formed [4]. Reaction products were identified and quantified by HPLC and authentic standards as described previously [3].

3 Results and discussion

The different forms of peroxxygenase from AaP secreted during the growth in soy bean media showed slightly differing p/s and an almost identical molecular mass of 46 kDa [1]. Since pure proteins are a fundamental pre-requisite for protein crystallography and comparative kinetic studies, we tested several high-resolution methods to obtain homogeneous AaP fractions.

3.1 Ion exchange chromatography

The first chromatographic separation step was performed on the strong cation exchanger SP Sepharose FF and resulted in the removal of most yellowish-colored components of the soy bean medium (proteins/peptides and phenolics) [24, 25]. The elution profile showed one heme-related peak (420 nm), and fractions possessing a veratryl alcohol oxidizing activity (at pH 7), which consisted of three proteins with different pI (Figs. 1A and B). These latter fractions were collected.

((Fig. 1))

The pre-purified and pooled enzyme fraction (Fig. 1) was used for further separation by ion exchange chromatography. The studies were focused on Mono Beads™ (Mono S, Mono Q), which are known to guarantee high resolution of protein separation [26]. However, the separation effect was not fully sufficient and just one active major fraction eluted from the Mono S column (Fig. 1C). In a previous study, two active enzyme fractions were obtained (designated as AaP I and II) by this purification step [1], and the major fraction (AaP II) has been used in most biochemical studies on AaP published so far [3–6]. The second ion chromatographic method was based on the strong anion exchanger Mono Q. Although the resolution was slightly better than that of the Mono S column, only two of the three main AaP forms were partly separated, and no pI-pure AaP protein was obtained (Fig. 1D). The overall insufficient purification of peroxxygenases by ion exchange chromatography may be caused by similar surface charges of the proteins, which

hampered their complete separation. Similar findings were reported for other fungal secretory proteins. Thus, two laccase isoforms of the well-investigated white-rot fungus *Ceriporiopsis subvermispota* could not be fully separated by ion exchange chromatography though their *pI* values differed to a greater extent than those of AaP. These laccase isoforms, and similarly an acidic manganese peroxidase form of the white-rot fungus *Nematoloma frowardii* b19 (nowadays referred to as *Phlebia* sp. *Nfb19*), were purified to homogeneity by preparative IEF [18, 27, 28].

3.2 Preparative IEF

In consequence, our next attempt to separate the different AaP forms was the application of preparative IEF. Initially, a focusing technique using a multi-compartment electrolyzer (IsoPrime, Hoefer, Amersham Pharmacia Biotech, Freiburg, Germany) was tested. However, almost the entire pre-purified protein bound irreversibly to the chamber membranes, which markedly swelled during the focusing process. This led to a high loss of AaP activity (up to 95%), so that this technique could not be used for separation of larger amounts of AaP. It has also been reported that the purification of a bacterial α -amylase by a multi-compartment electrolyzer failed due to severe problems of protein precipitation near the *pI* value of the enzyme [23]. In fact, reports describing a successful separation of proteins or peptides by the multi-compartment electrolyzer refer mostly to intracellular non-glycosylated proteins, oligopeptides or amino acids [29–31], and to our best knowledge, protocols concerning the isolation of extracellular fungal enzymes by this technique are lacking.

In most cases, the isolation of fungal proteins and their isoforms by IEF was done using thick IEF gels and a Multiphor II apparatus (Pharmacia, Sweden), which is no longer commercially available (personal communication, GE Healthcare) or by a Rotofor unit (Bio-Rad) [8, 17, 18]. Unfortunately, the latter procedure was also not

1
2
3 suitable for fractionating the complex mixture of AaP proteins. The almost equal
4
5 distribution of active enzyme fractions, without forming distinct activity maxima, and
6
7 the accumulation of the AaP forms II and III (pI 5.6 and 6.1) with increasing pH
8
9 (fractions 8-12 – which becomes evident in the corresponding IEF gel) proved that
10
11 no distinct AaP form can be obtained by this method (Figs. 2A and B). Related
12
13 findings were reported for peroxidase isoforms of the grape plant (*Vitis vinifera*) and
14
15 for other heme proteins like horseradish peroxidase or lactoperoxidase [17, 23]. The
16
17 low buffering capacity in the region around their pI/s was responsible for the
18
19 equilibrium not being reached and for the failure of the focusing/separation process
20
21 [32]. While the purification of single forms of fungal enzymes by preparative IEF has
22
23 been described in a few reports [16, 33–35], the applicability of this procedure for
24
25 the separation of chloroperoxidase or peroxygenases has not been demonstrated so
26
27 far.
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30
31 ((Fig. 2))
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34 35 36 3.3 Chromatofocusing

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39 Since the separation methods sensitive to a low variation of the protein's surface
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41 charge seemed to be the only remaining possibility for the purification of the AaP
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43 forms, we tested chromatofocusing on a Mono P column in combination with a pH
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45 gradient elution. The AaP proteins eluted from the column one by one according to
46
47 their pI/s with decreasing pH (from 7 to 4) of the mobile phase. Figure 3 shows the
48
49 respective elution profile and reveals the separation of six veratryl alcohol oxidizing
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51 fractions (three major and three minor ones), corresponding to the earlier finding of
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53 six AaP forms with different pI/s [1]. Thus, we finally obtained the three major AaP
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55 forms (AaP I–III) with a recovery of up to 79% overall, as well as specific activities of
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57 77, 94 and 103 U/mg (Table 1). These three proteins formed single bands with pI/s
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59
60

of 5.2, 5.6 and 6.1 in the analytical IEF gel, proving the success of the purification procedure (Fig. 3B).
((Fig. 3))((Table 1))

3.4 Substrate oxidation by major AaP forms

Toluene and naphthalene were used as substrates to prove the true peroxygenase nature of the AaP proteins obtained after Mono P separation. Results are summarized in Table 2 and show no significant differences between the different AaP forms, either in regard to the product pattern or to the percentage of individual oxidation products. All AaP fractions oxygenated toluene at both the side chain and the aromatic ring yielding benzyl alcohol, benzaldehyde and benzoic acid, and *o*-cresol, *p*-cresol and methylhydroquinone, respectively. The ratio of side chain vs. aromatic hydroxylation was about 2:1 in all cases. Naphthalene was regioselectively converted into 1-naphthol and 2-naphthol at a ratio of 12:1. Differences in this ratio compared to an earlier study [3] can be explained by the use of a syringe pump for continuous peroxide supply instead of the repeated addition of H₂O₂. The findings suggest that the different AaP fractions represent quite similar enzyme proteins that may differ just in their glycosylation pattern [7]. Similar observations have already been made for the different isoforms of chloroperoxidase [36, 37].

((Table 2))

4 Concluding remarks

Our results suggest that preparative IEF techniques are unsuited to the separation of fungal peroxygenases with similar molecular mass and *pI*. On the other hand, we were able to demonstrate that pre-purification on SP Sepharose followed by

chromatofocusing can be a powerful tool to attain this goal. To show that the separated AaP proteins are in fact differently glycosylated isoforms of one and the same protein (and do not represent different isoenzymes originating from different genes), future studies will focus on the determination of individual catalytic constants (K_m and k_{cat}) for the different peroxygenase forms and also follow specific molecular approaches to correlate AaP gene transcription and enzyme secretion (e.g., by real-time PCR). The separation method described here has already been successfully applied to prepare larger quantities of homogenous AaP forms. This was achieved by repeated injection of pre-purified protein and repeated running of the separation program until sufficient amounts of the three major proteins were collected (up to 5 mg). Meanwhile the purified proteins have successfully been crystallized and are currently being studied with respect to their crystal structure.

We thank Jörg Nüske (Friedrich Schiller University Jena), Martin Gunter Kluge (Inge) and Katrin Scheibner for useful comments and Monika Brandt for technical assistance. The work was supported by the European Union (integrated project "Biorenew"), the Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung (BMBF, project 0313433D) and the German Environmental Foundation (DBU, project "Neuartige Peroxygenasen für die Produktion von Fein- und Industriechemikalien").

((Funded by:

- European Union
- Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung
- German Environmental Foundation))

The authors have declared no conflict of interest.

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Figure 1. (A) FPLC elution profile of the first purification step (pre-purification) of AaP using the strong cation exchanger SP Sepharose FF. The pooled AaP fraction obtained was the starting material for all further separation studies. (B) Analytical IEF gel of the pre-purified AaP proteins (2), protein marker (1). (C) Partial separation of AaP proteins on the strong cation exchanger Mono S, and (D) on the strong anion exchanger Mono Q. Solid line, absorbance at 420 nm (heme-thiolate of AaP); black circles, AaP activity assayed with veratryl alcohol at pH 7.0; dashed lines, NaCl gradient.

Figure 2. Preparative IEF of AaP using a Rotofor unit. (A) Gray bars, AaP fractions recovered from the focusing cell and assayed with veratryl alcohol (pH 7.0); black circles, pH gradient. Fractions with the highest AaP activity are highlighted in gray (fraction 5–12) and were analyzed in an IEF gel (B). M, protein marker.

Figure 3. Separation of different AaP forms by chromatofocusing. (A) Elution profile recorded after chromatofocusing on the mixed anion exchanger Mono P; separated AaP forms are highlighted in gray. Solid line, absorbance at 420 nm; black circles, AaP activity assayed with veratryl alcohol (pH 7.0); thin dashed line, concentration buffer B (%); thick dashed line, actual pH gradient. (B) Separated AaP forms visualized in an IEF gel; AaP I (pI 6.1), AaP II (pI 5.6), AaP III (pI 5.2).

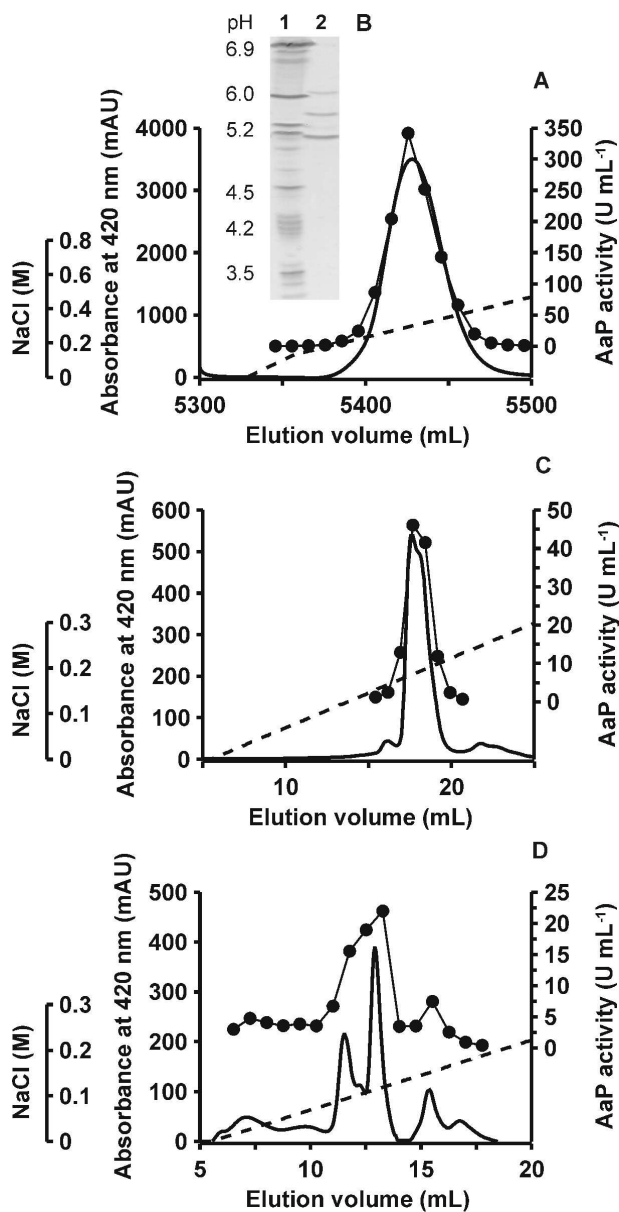
Table 1. Purification of the three main isoforms of AaP (I–III) by FPLC

Purification step	Protein (mg)	Total activity (U)	Specific activity (U/mg)	Yield (%)	Purification (x-fold)
Culture liquid	60	141	2	100	
Ultrafiltration	55	140	2	99	1
SP Sepharose	35	135	4	96	2
Mono P, AaP I	0.56	43	77	30	33
Mono P, AaP II	0.35	33	94	23	40
Mono P, AaP III	0.36	37	103	26	44

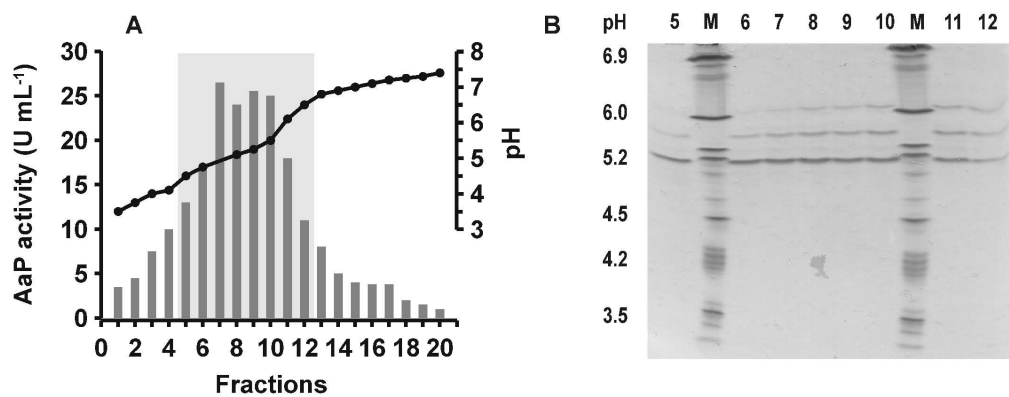
Table 2. Oxidation of toluene and naphthalene by the three major AaP forms obtained after Mono P separation

Substrate	Products	% ^{a)} of products formed by		
		AaP I	AaP II	AaP III
Toluene	Benzyl alcohol	22.5	22.1	22.0
	Benzaldehyde	25.6	25.9	26.8
	Benzoic acid	16.1	18.1	18.2
	<i>o</i> -Cresol	1.4	1.3	1.1
	<i>p</i> -Cresol	2.4	2.0	1.8
	Methylhydroquinone	32.0	30.6	30.0
	Total	100	100	99.9
Naphthalene	1-Naphthol	94.0	93.5	94.5
	2-Naphthol	6.0	7.0	6.0
	Total	102.4	99.8	99.4

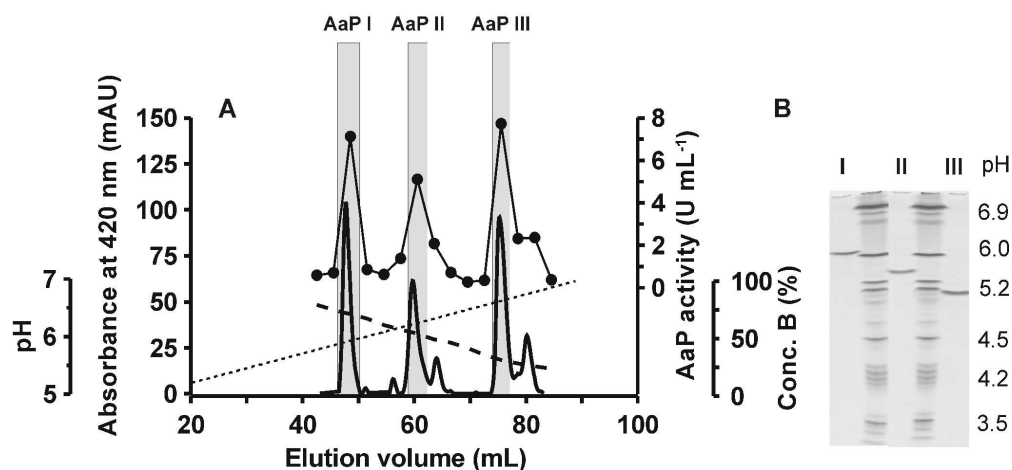
a) Percentages are given as mean values of three different measurements with SD <5%.



(A) FPLC elution profile of the first purification step (pre-purification) of *Agrocybe aegerita* peroxxygenase (AaP) using the strong cation exchanger SP Sepharose FF. The pooled AaP fraction obtained was the starting material for all further separation studies. (B) Analytical IEF gel of the pre-purified AaP proteins (2), protein marker (1). (C) Partial separation of AaP proteins on the strong cation exchanger Mono S and (D) on the strong anion exchanger Mono Q. Solid line - absorbance at 420 nm (heme-thiolate of AaP), black circles - AaP activity assayed with veratryl alcohol at pH 7.0, dashed lines - NaCl gradient.



Preparative isoelectric focusing of *A. aegerita* peroxygenase using a Rotofor unit. **(A)** Grey bars – AaP fractions recovered from the focusing cell and assayed with veratryl alcohol (pH 7.0), black circles – pH gradient. Fractions with the highest AaP activity are highlighted in grey (fraction 5-12) and were analyzed in an IEF gel **(B)**, protein marker (M).



Separation of different AaP forms by chromatofocusing. **(A)** Elution profile recorded after chromatofocusing on the mixed anion exchanger Mono P, separated AaP forms are highlighted in grey. Solid line - absorbance at 420 nm, black circles - AaP activity assayed with veratryl alcohol (pH 7.0), thin dashed line - concentration buffer B (%), thick dashed line - actual pH gradient; **(B)** separated AaP forms visualized in an IEF gel - AaP I (pI 6.1), AaP II (pI 5.6), AaP III (5.2).