

The helical arrangement of the protein sub-units in tobacco mosaic virus

X-ray diffraction studies^{1,2} have established that in the tobacco mosaic virus (TMV) particle the virus protein is in the form of structural sub-units set in helical array about the particle axis, and that there are (very nearly³) $3n + 1$ such sub-units on three turns of the helix. The pitch of the helix is 23 Å and the axial repeat period, therefore, 69 Å. The value of n has, however, remained uncertain. It has been estimated as 10¹ or 12², giving 31 or 37 sub-units in the axial repeat period. We now know that both of these estimates are false, and believe the correct value of n to be 16, giving 49 sub-units in 3 turns of the helix.

The method used to establish this result was altogether more rigorous than that used to obtain the earlier estimates. It will be described in detail in *Acta Crystallographica*. It is based on a detailed quantitative comparison of the X-ray scattering by normal TMV and by a mercury-substituted TMV, (Hg-TMV), kindly prepared for us by Dr. FRAENKEL-CONRAT. In this preparation mercury was bound to the cystein residue of the virus protein, in the form $-\text{Hg}-\text{CH}_3$, to the extent of one Hg atom to about 20,000 molecular weight of virus. Since there is only one cystein residue in each chemical sub-unit of virus protein⁴ it is to be expected that all mercury atoms occupy equivalent sites in Hg-TMV, and hence that they all lie at the same radial distance from the particle axis. Our X-ray diffraction measurements, on the equator and first five layer-lines of the fibre-diagrams of TMV and Hg-TMV, led us to conclude that all (or very nearly all) the mercury atoms lie on a helix of radius 57 ± 1 Å, and, further, that in the axial repeat period of 69 Å there are 3 turns of the helix and 49 equally spaced mercury sites.

Since there is only one mercury site on each chemical sub-unit, this indicates that there are 49 *chemical* sub-units on 3 turns of the helix. Using this result, it is found that a self-consistent interpretation of a substantial part of the X-ray diagram of TMV is obtained if it be supposed that

there are 49 *structural* sub-units in 3 turns of the helix. There is thus strong evidence that the sub-units determined by chemical methods on the one hand, by X-ray methods on the other, are identical.

We must now consider the implications of this conclusion with regard to the relationship between the molecular weights of the sub-unit and of the complete virus particle. Taking the particle length to be 3000 Å,⁵ there are $49 \times 3000/69 = 2130$ sub-units in the complete particle. If the molecular weight of a sub-unit is 17,000^{3,6}, this gives a total molecular weight of $36.2 \cdot 10^6$ for the protein or, assuming a nucleic acid content of 6%⁴, a molecular weight of $38.4 \cdot 10^6$ for the virus particle. If the sub-unit weight is 18,000 the particle weight calculated in this way is $40.7 \cdot 10^6$.

Our results therefore suggest that the molecular weight of TMV is about $40 \cdot 10^6$. This is in good agreement with the values obtained by SCHRAMM AND BERGOLD⁷ using sedimentation and diffusion measurements, and by OSTER, DOTY AND ZIMM⁸ and OSTER⁹, using light-scattering measurements. On the other hand WILLIAMS, BACKUS AND STEERE¹⁰, using a direct method involving weighing and electron microscope measurements, found the particle weight to be $50 \cdot 10^6$.

We do not attempt, here, to decide between these conflicting values. We wish to stress, however, that, as far as the chemical and X-ray determination of the particle weight of TMV is concerned, the value, $40 \cdot 10^6$, arrived at above refers to the RNA together with the protein sub-units which follow the helical arrangement described. On the basis of the X-ray data alone we cannot exclude the possibility that the virus particle contains *small* amounts of protein organised in a different way. The combination of chemical and X-ray data, however, probably provides the most accurate method of determining the weight of that part of the virus which follows the regular helical arrangement.

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