Circular dichroism is sensitive to monovalent cation binding in Monensin complexes

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Abstract: Monensin is a natural antibiotic that exhibits high affinity to certain metal ions. In order to explore its potential in coordination chemistry, circular dichroism spectra of Monensic acid A (MonH) and its derivatives containing monovalent cations (Li$^+$, Na$^+$, K$^+$, Rb$^+$, Ag$^+$ and Et$_4$N$^+$) in methanolic solutions were measured and compared to computational models. Whereas the conventional CD spectroscopy (CD) allowed recording of the transitions down to 192 nm, synchrotron radiation circular dichroism (SRCD) revealed other bands in the 178-192 nm wavelength range. CD signs and intensities significantly varied in the studied compounds, in spite of their similar crystal structure.

Computational modelling based on the density functional theory (DFT) and continuum solvent model suggests that the solid state Monensin structure is largely conserved in the solutions as well. Time-dependent density functional theory (TDDFT) simulations did not allow band-to-band comparison with experimental spectra due to their limited precision, but indicate that the spectral changes are caused by a combination of minor conformational changes upon the monovalent cation binding and a direct involvement of the metal electrons in Monensin electronic transitions. Both the experiment and simulations thus show that the CD spectra of Monensin complexes are very sensitive to the captured ions and can be used for their discrimination.

Introduction

Monensin is a natural antibiotic produced by *Streptomyces cinnamonensis*.[1-3] It is widely applied in stock farming and veterinary medicine due to its pronounced coccidiostatic and antibacterial properties.[4-14] The main form of the ionophore is Monensin A (Monensic acid, MonH), accompanied by two minor factors, Monensin B and Monensin C, also produced by the *Streptomyces* bacteria. From a chemical point of view, Monensin A is a polyether derivative of a monocarboxylic acid (Scheme 1). Its monohydrated form (MonH×H$_2$O) exists in a pseudo-cyclic conformation secured by head-to-tail H-bonding between the carboxylic moiety and the alcoholic hydroxyl group (of the last six-membered ring O11), with a supplementary binding of a water molecule.[15,16] Oxygen atoms pointing inside the cavity ensure its hydrophilic character, while the alkyl-rich polyether backbone provides antibiotic lipophilicity and corresponding cell membrane activity.

SCHEME 1

Another interesting property of Monensin is its ability to form complexes with certain monovalent metal cations. The antibiotic acts as a monoanion through deprotonated carboxylic function, assuring an overall neutral charge of the complex. These complexes can also easily penetrate bacteria's cell membranes via the so called electrogenic and nonelectrogenic mechanisms.[17-24] Inside the cell dissociation processes occur, leading to disturbance of pH and metal ion equilibria. Subsequent changes activate a variety of further events, ultimately leading to cell death. Better understanding of the metal ion complexation of Monensin in solution will contribute to elucidation of the details of the above processes.

The affinity of Monensin to bind monovalent metal ions decreases in the order of Ag$^+$ > Na$^+$ > K$^+$ > Rb$^+$ > Li$^+$ ~ Cs$^+$.[25] Molecular geometries of complexes with lithium, sodium, potassium, rubidium, and silver cations were determined by X-ray diffraction on single crystals.[26-35] The crystal forms are very

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similar, with the monovalent metal ion trapped into the central cavity and coordinated at least with six oxygen (-O-, -OH) donor atoms. Carboxylate oxygens do not participate in the binding, but two hydrogen bonds between the carboxylate group and alcoholic OH groups at the opposite end of the molecule stabilize the pseudo-cyclic structure, which is slightly differently than in a free ligand.

MonH and its monovalent metal complexes exhibit a very low solubility in water, but are readily soluble in methanol, ethanol, acetone, or chloroform. These solutions were studied in potentiometric,[36-42] NMR,[43-47] polarographic,[48] and mass-spectrometric[49-54] experiments. Natural polyether ionophores, as lasalocid and salinomycin were studied by CD in the near UV range,[55-59] but in the lack of suitable chromophores this technique was not employed so far for Monensin.

Let us recall that the usage of the CD spectroscopy, at least as a complementary method, appears convenient for many reasons. It is in general more sensitive with respect to the sample amount and structural changes than infrared absorption, the experiment is simpler than X-ray diffraction, NMR or mass-spectroscopy, it is applicable to solutions unlike X-ray diffraction, etc. On the other hand, CD often provides rather limited resolution and number of spectral features; these disadvantages can be at least partially sorted out by the possibility to interpret the spectra on the basis of parameter-free quantum-chemical computations.

In the present paper the potency of conventional circular dichroism (CD) and synchrotron radiation circular dichroism (SRCD) spectroscopy is explored to evaluate complexation ability of Monensin A with respect to monovalent cations in solution. The experimental data are discussed on the basis of computational modelling. Density functional theory (DFT) and a dielectric solvent model are used to estimate solution geometries, and time-dependent DFT (TDDFT) is used to simulate the absorption and CD spectra.

Materials and Methods

MATERIALS

Sodium Monensinate (MonNa) was kindly provided by Biovet Ltd. (Peshtera, Bulgaria). Metal(I) salts, Et_4NOH and methanol of analytical grade were supplied by Merck / Fluka.

Monensic acid (MonH×H_2O), tetraethylammonium Monensinate (MonNEt$_4$) and monovalent metal complexes MonM (M = K, Rb, Li, Ag) were prepared as described previously.[26,40] The complex formation was confirmed by IR spectroscopy (Fig. S1, FT-IR Nikolet 6700 spectrophotometer, Thermo Scientific, KBr pellet). Isolated solid state Monensin complexes were dissolved in methanol for subsequent measurements. The data from titrations of MonH with monovalent metal ions fit well these (Fig. S2). MonNEt$_4$ was obtained *in situ*.

CD SPECTROSCOPY

CD spectroscopic measurements were performed on a JASCO J-815 spectrometer with solution samples (concentration of 5–20 mmol dm^{-3}, temperature of 25 °C) kept in a fused silica cuvette of 0.2 mm optical pathlength. The spectra were recorded in the 180-300 nm range, using 0.5 nm resolution, 2 s response time, and a scanning speed of 20 nm/min.

Synchrotron radiation CD (SRCD) spectra were recorded at the AU-CD beam line SRCD facility, part of the ASTRID2 storage ring at the Institute for Storage Ring Facilities (ISA), University of Aarhus, Aarhus, Denmark.[60,61] The compounds were dissolved in methanol to concentrations of 40–100 mmol dm^{-3}. All spectra were recorded at 24.4 °C in 1 nm steps with a dwell time of 2 s per step, in the wavelength range of 170-300 nm and with resolution of 0.5 nm. Spectra of sodium Monensinate (MonNa) were recorded using both 0.2 mm and 0.014 mm cuvettes, whereas 0.014 mm only was used for the rest.

Two accumulations were averaged both for the CD and SRCD measurements. The molar absorbance and molar ellipticity of compounds were calculated after subtraction of the solvent (methanol) spectra acquired at identical conditions.

CALCULATIONS

X-ray structures of Monensic acid (MonH×H_2O - MONSNI)[15] and its monovalent metal complexes MonM (M = Li$^+$ - MIPSIO,[33] Na$^+$ - DEYGAQ,[32] K$^+$ - FECROU10,[30] Rb$^+$ - RITLIQ,[34] Ag$^+$ - MONSIN10[26]) were used as starting geometries. The structures were fully optimized in the Gausian09.Rev.D01 program[62] using the B3LYP functional[63] and the conductor-like polarizable continuum solvent model (CPCM)[64] to account for the methanol environment. CAM-B3LYP invented to improve B3LYP. B3PW91, LC-WPBE and WB97XD functionals were also applied, but did not give better results than the standard B3LYP (Fig. S3).

Alternatively to the full optimization, X-ray geometries, partially optimized in the normal mode coordinates were used as well; normal modes with frequencies $|\omega_i| < 300$ cm^{-1} were fixed.[65] The partial optimization corrected in particular bond lengths and angles of the hydrogen atoms, determined with a big error or completely missing in the crystal structures.

The 6-311++G** basis set was used for the carboxyl group atoms, the MWB28 pseudopotential[66] and basis set were used for silver and rubidium atoms, and the 6-31G** basis set was used for the rest. For the optimized structures, UV and CD spectra were calculated at the TDDFT[67] / CPCM level. For each system 100 electronic excited states were obtained to cover the experimentally observable spectral range.

Results and Discussion

To the best of our knowledge we report for the first time the spectral changes occurring upon complexation of Monensin A, evaluated by means of CD spectroscopy. As some readers might not be familiar with the SRCD technique, we compare classical CD and SRCD measurements done using the same 0.2 mm optical pathlength cell. The CD and SRCD spectra of sodium Monensinate (MonNa), as well as, the total absorbances derived from the same measurements are plotted in Fig. S4. The careful comparison of the two techniques in this setup showed only minor differences. Keeping the total absorbance value below 2 is a prerequisite to obtain reliable CD spectra. By means

of conventional CD and SRCD under the same experimental conditions such data were obtained in the UV range down to 192 and 187 nm, respectively. In both CD and SRCD the absorbance of the solvent used (MeOH) with and without MonNa is almost the same demonstrating the negligible contribution of the dissolved substance to the total absorbance. The CD and SRCD spectra of MonNa correspond reasonably well to each other. Below 192 nm, the conventional CD quickly deteriorates due to the high absorption and low sensitivity.

The CD spectra of MonH and all the monovalent complexes (recorded at 0.2 mm optical pathlength) are presented in Fig. 1. The results show that position and sign of CD signals significantly depend on the protonation state of the ligand and coordinated cation. MonH, for example, exhibits positive sign within 190-245 nm with two maxima at 218 and 192 nm, while the replacement of H^+ with the Et_4N^+ cation diminishes the 218 nm band (although it remains still positive) and gives rise to a positive maximum at 195 nm. The observed spectral variance can be probably attributed to formation of an alternative hydrogen-bonding network. Most probably, MonH stays in the "closed" conformation as it was found most favourable for the anionic form.[15,68]

FIGURE 1

The trapping of monovalent metal ions into the ligand cavity causes significant changes in the CD spectra. The complexation of sodium ions is accompanied by appearance of two bands, at 200 nm (positive) and 216 nm (negative). The coordination of lithium ions provides a negative signal within 190-230 nm, while the CD spectrum of the silver complex contains positive (196 nm) and negative (208 nm) bands. The potassium and rubidium complexes of Monensin are mostly characterized by negative bands at 201-203 nm.

We were able to obtain additional data in the far UV region by SRCD spectroscopy using a shorter optical pathlength of 0.014 mm (Fig. 2). The spectra were cut at 178 nm by the limitation due to the high absorbance values (HT > 5 below this wavelength). Absorption spectra of all compounds are quite similar, except for the MonAg with a characteristic shoulders at longer wavelengths (200 and 218 nm). The absorption intensity generally increased upon exchange of H^+ with monovalent cations. Low-wavelength CD bands unseen by conventional CD are of high intensity and provide additional possibility to distinguish different Monensin complexes. The experimental spectra of MonH and MonNEt$_4$ possess negative signal below 190 nm, and silver complex has a strong negative band at 185 nm. The coordination of lithium ions leads to appearance of a negative band at 187 nm accompanied by a negative shoulder at *c.a.* 200-220 nm. Spectral shapes of the MonK and MonRb complexes in the range of 180-185 nm differ, in spite of the similarities observed within the 190-220 nm interval. The sodium complex of Monensin provides a unique spectrum, too.

Figure 2

The comparison of CD and SRCD spectra reveals a very good agreement in the range of 192-300 nm. The SRCD technique leads to higher signal to noise ratio, and the SRCD setup with the thin 0.014 mm cell provides characteristic, high intensity

signal even within the 178-192 nm region of a high absorption.[60,61]

Structural changes upon metal binding may account for such differences in CD spectra. However, these are quite small. The structures of Monensin A and its metal complexes were compared; the root-mean-square deviations (RMSD)[69] obtained using the PyMol alignment procedure are collected in Table I. We see that the overall conformation of the ligand is very similar in each complex. Despite this similarity observed also in the IR and NMR spectra of monovalent Monensinates,[32,33,35,47] the CD spectra differ significantly in band positions, signs and intensities. Nevertheless, some trends can be observed. The fine structure of MonH differs from those of the metal complexes (RMSD ~ 0.7; Fig. S5), which may be reflected in the CD intensities (Fig. 3). Both the MonLi and MonNa, and MonK and MonRb crystal pairs look rather similar (RMSD ~ 0.2; Fig. S6), in accordance with the good agreement in the wavelengths of CD minima and maxima.

Considering that there is no significant change in the overall structures of the species when dissolved in methanol – which can also be supposed from NMR data published earlier[45-47] – at least some differences in the CD spectra might be explained by the small conformational changes of the ligand molecule upon complexation. On the other hand, the crystal structure of MonAg, which is also different from MonH and is rather similar to MonM structures (e.g. RMSD ~ 0.1 for the comparison with MonNa, Fig S7), has a rather unique CD spectrum.

Calculated absorption and CD spectra (Fig. 2) may provide better understanding of the problem, although they do not reproduce the experiment quantitatively. The absorption spectra exhibit a limited number of features to be compared, except for the outstanding high-wavelength absorption of the Ag derivative. The fully-optimized geometries (middle panel) provide better absorption profile of the K-derivative, otherwise they do not exhibit a clear advantage against the X-ray model (bottom).

Occasional agreement of calculated and experimental CD spectra can be observed. For example both spectra of MonH are negative around 180 nm. The measured curve is positive above ~ 185 nm, but the calculation predicts a negative signal at higher wavelengths that is not observed experimentally. Part of the disagreement can be given by the position of hydrogen atoms, not clearly given by the X-ray data. The usual error of the TDDFT method[70] and complicated conformational and hydration equilibria that could not be included in the calculations due to excessive computational demands also hinder a more detailed comparison of calculated and experimental CD intensities.

On the other hand, the calculations well-document the sensitivity of Monensin to the metal binding. Also, based on the orbital analysis, we could also assign the most prominent spectral features. Thus most transitions around 180 nm in monovalent Monensinates (except the Ag^+-derivative) are σ → σ*; transitions within 190-200 nm can be approximately thought of as σ → σ*, and within 200 to 206 nm n → σ* transitions dominate ("n" means a non-bonding (lone pair) orbital on oxygen in hydroxyl or carboxyl). Most but not all transitions above 180 nm are located around the carboxyl residue. The highest wavelength bands around 210-215 nm are attributed to σ → π* and n → π*

transitions, where the π-orbitals mostly belong to the carboxyl, although a small participation of the lone pairs on hydroxyl oxygen can be also counted as π. With silver cation, the situation is different, as the silver transitions are stronger and dominate - all the 180, 215, 230 and 242 nm intense bands are assigned to 4d → 5s transition; the n, π and σ orbitals of Monensin also contribute as above, but their contribution is weaker.

The spectra generated with the partially optimized structures (lower part of Fig. 2) provide very similar results in terms of agreement/disagreement with the experiment, which also suggest that the overall ligand geometries are rather similar. However, it should be mentioned that e.g. for MonK and MonRb the spectra calculated for the partially optimized ("crystal") geometry compare better to experimental CD than that those obtained for the fully optimized structure.

Thus, although the calculations do not reproduce well detailed experimental CD patterns, they confirm that the metal ions can induce specific CD shapes under a minimal change of conformation. The limited accuracy can be explained by the complexity of the system and accumulation of computational error stemming from the DFT and TDDFT approximations, approximate solvent model and lack of dynamics in the modelling. Yet several trends could be observed, such as the profound difference in the behaviour of the Ag$^+$-ion if compared to the others.

To understand better the link between the spectrum and the structure, we performed various computational experiments. In Fig. 3, simulated absorption and CD spectra for the Li$^+$, Na$^+$, K$^+$, Rb$^+$ and Ag$^+$ complexes, and their counterparts with the same ligand structure but metal ions removed, are plotted. The spectral shapes and the pairwise comparison demonstrate that the metal ion can significantly affect the spectrum participating in electronic transitions and inducing changes in the ligand fine structure. We marked the position of the highest-wavelength (lowest-energy) electronic transition for different metal complexes. As expected, this "threshold" transition largely involves the HOMO and LUMO orbitals. Both the position and relative intensity of these bands vary for different metal ions, with the Ag$^+$-ion causing the largest shift of the absorption band to longer wavelength, in agreement with the experiment.

Figure 3

On a qualitative level, one can see the influence of the metal ion binding on electronic structure in Fig. 4, where the HOMO and LUMO orbitals are exemplified for the MonH and its monovalent derivatives. Apparently, in most metal complexes, the orbitals, in particular HOMO, shift closer to the molecular site where the metals are bound. The Ag$^+$ complex is an exception, with HOMO being relatively far from the metal, but the LUMO shape is unique due to the participation of the Ag 5s orbital. The delocalization of the orbitals lends CD spectra additional sensitivity to fine conformational changes.

Figure 4

The comparison of the optimized structures gives a similar picture as for the crystal structures (Table I). The metal complexes do not deviate much from MonH and the pairwise similarity of MonLi and MonNa can still be recognized (RMSD ~ 0.2). The increase of the size of the metal ion, however, seems to increase discrepancies between the X-ray and computed geometries. This can be demonstrated by the RMSD values derived from the comparison of each crystal structure and its optimized counterpart (first column in Table I). While these numbers for MonH, MonLi and MonNa are below 0.2, they increase for MonK, MonRb and also for MonAg. The strict similarity between MonK and MonRb has been lost (RMSD ~ 0.7), as well.

Table I

Table II and Fig S8 provide more details of the fine structural changes during the optimization process. By the comparison of the probable hydrogen bonding scheme between the two termini of the Monensinate ion in different complexes, we can state that the most significant fine changes occurred in the MonK and MonAg structures. In addition the M-O atomic distances also vary in the MonK complex as the carboxylate oxygens approached the metal ion during the optimization. The original distance of K$^+$ from both carboxylate oxygens is ~ 3.5 Å and from the coordinated oxygens is around 2.7 Å, while in the optimized structure, the carboxylate oxygen-metal ion distances are ~2.9 Å and the other oxygens are at 2.8-2.9 Å, a little bit further from the metal ion than in initial structure. In the metal ion bonding network of the MonRb complex there are gradual changes of the distances, but the overall structure and the coordination mode seems to be the same as in the crystal.

Table II

The differences might reflect approximations (solvent model, limited basis set, functional) used in the calculations, but such small deviations between the solution and crystal structures may also be realistic. As was pointed out in the reviewing process, the experiments in methanol may also be biased due to residual traces of water (potentially bound to Monensin) that are difficult to control. In any case, the overall similarity of the crystal and fully optimized DFT structures of the metal complexes of Monensin contrast with their different CD spectral patterns. In general, we can thus conclude that while it is difficult to estimate extent of the geometry change when the crystals are dissolved in methanol, the comparison of calculated and experimental spectral patterns can provide useful indications.

Conclusion

In order to explore the unique metal-binding properties of the Monensin A antibiotic, we recorded and analysed CD and SRCD spectra of its complexes with ammonium, light and heavy monovalent metal ions. The SRCD technique provided higher signal-to-noise ratio and enabled measurement in a wider wavelength range than CD. Except for the Ag$^+$-ion, the metal ion binding did not significantly influence the absorption spectrum, whereas significant changes occurred in CD. This behaviour was on a qualitative level explained by time-dependent density functional computations of solution geometries and excitation spectra. These confirmed that incorporation of monovalent cations into the antibiotic structure does not significantly change the solid state conformation, but that the cation directly

participates in the electronic transitions which may be largely responsible for the CD pattern changes. Because of the large and metal-specific spectral variations under the binding, we can thus conclude that the CD spectroscopy can be used as a sensitive indicator of Monensin A monovalent cation binding.

Supporting information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's website.

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