

# Metal-free class Ie ribonucleotide reductase from pathogens initiates catalysis with a tyrosine-derived dihydroxyphenylalanine radical

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All cells obtain 2'-deoxyribonucleotides for DNA synthesis through the activity of a ribonucleotide reductase (RNR). The class I RNRs found in humans and pathogenic bacteria differ in (i) use of Fe(II), Mn(II), or both for activation of the dinuclear-metallocofactor subunit,  $\beta$ ; (ii) reaction of the reduced dimetal center with dioxygen or superoxide for this activation; (iii) requirement (or lack thereof) for a flavoprotein activase, NrdI, to provide the superoxide from O<sub>2</sub>; and (iv) use of either a stable tyrosyl radical or a high-valent dimetal cluster to initiate each turnover by oxidizing a cysteine residue in the  $\alpha$  subunit to a radical (Cys<sup>•</sup>). The use of manganese by bacterial class I, subclass b-d RNRs, which contrasts with the exclusive use of iron by the eukaryotic Ia enzymes, appears to be a countermeasure of certain pathogens against iron deprivation imposed by their hosts. Here, we report a metal-free type of class I RNR (subclass e) from two human pathogens. The Cys<sup>•</sup> in its  $\alpha$  subunit is generated by a stable, tyrosine-derived dihydroxyphenylalanine radical (DOPA<sup>•</sup>) in  $\beta$ . The three-electron oxidation producing DOPA<sup>•</sup> occurs in *Escherichia coli* only if the  $\beta$  is coexpressed with the NrdI activase encoded adjacently in the pathogen genome. The independence of this new RNR from transition metals, or the requirement for a single metal ion only transiently for activation, may afford the pathogens an even more potent countermeasure against transition metal-directed innate immunity.

DNA biosynthesis | semiquinone | DOPA

Ribonucleotide reductases (RNRs) catalyze the only known biochemical reaction—replacement of the 2' hydroxyl group of a ribonucleoside 5'-diphosphate or -triphosphate by hydrogen—that provides the substrates for DNA replication and repair (1). RNRs use a largely conserved pathway for C2' reduction. A transient thiyl radical produced by one-electron oxidation of a cysteine residue (Cys<sup>•</sup>) removes a hydrogen atom (H<sup>•</sup>) from C3' of the substrate (2). The 3' radical activates C2' for dehydration, and ensuing electron, proton, and/or hydrogen-atom transfers (from sulfur-containing amino acids and/or formate) then generate a 2'-deoxy 3'-radical, which retakes the H<sup>•</sup> from the cysteine to complete the reduction and regenerate the Cys<sup>•</sup> (3). Importantly, the Cys<sup>•</sup> is not present in any resting RNR but must be generated at the outset and quenched at the end of each turnover.

The imperative for Cys<sup>•</sup> production engendered at least three distinct classes (I–III) of RNRs and four known subclasses (a–d) within class I (1, 4, 5). Different transition metal-dependent strategies for Cys<sup>•</sup> generation define the (sub)classes. Class II (6) and class III (7) RNRs use cobalamin and iron-sulfur cofactors, respectively, to generate the Cys<sup>•</sup>. The class III enzymes undergo preactivation by a separate protein, a radical-SAM (*S*-adenosyl-L-methionine) activase (7). The activase uses its iron-

sulfur cluster to reductively cleave SAM, and the resultant 5'-dA<sup>•</sup> abstracts H<sup>•</sup> from a glycine residue in the RNR. The stable glycol radical generates the Cys<sup>•</sup> to initiate each turnover.

Class I RNRs, such as the enzymes found in all eukarya and many pathogenic bacteria, use a separate ferritin-like protein subunit, denoted  $\beta$ , as radical initiator. RNR  $\beta$  subunits contain four core helices that provide six metal ligands, two histidines and four carboxylates (Fig. 1 *A* and *B*), to a dinuclear, divalent metal cluster (M<sub>2</sub><sup>II/II</sup>) (4). M<sub>2</sub><sup>II/II</sup>- $\beta$  reacts with a form of dioxygen to install a stable oxidant that generates the Cys<sup>•</sup> in the catalytic subunit,  $\alpha$ , by a long-range intersubunit radical-translocation (RT) process

## Significance

Conversion of ribonucleotides to the 2'-deoxyribonucleotides required for DNA biosynthesis is catalyzed by ribonucleotide reductases (RNRs) via a free-radical mechanism. Known types of RNRs all depend on redox-active transition metals—manganese, iron, or cobalt—for radical initiation. Pathogenic bacteria are challenged by transition metal sequestration and infliction of oxidative stress by their hosts, and the deployment of multiple RNRs with different metal requirements and radical-initiating oxidants is a known bacterial countermeasure. A class I RNR from two bacterial pathogens completely lacks transition metals in its active state and uses a tyrosine-derived dihydroxyphenylalanine radical as its initiator, embodying a novel tactic to combat transition metal- and oxidant-mediated innate immunity and reinforcing bacterial RNRs as potential antibiotic targets.

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Data deposition: The atomic coordinates and structure factors have been deposited in the Protein Data Bank, [www.wwwpdb.org](http://www wwwpdb.org) (PDB ID codes [6EBO](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pdb), [6EBP](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pdb), [6EBQ](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pdb), and [6EBZ](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pdb)).

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mediated by a chain of conserved aromatic residues that spans the subunit interface and connects the active sites (8). RT is bidirectional, occurring in the first and last steps of each turnover to generate and quench the 3'-H-cleaving Cys\*.

The identities of the transition metals (manganese or iron), activating oxidants (dioxxygen or superoxide), and Cys\* generators (high-valent dimetal center or tyrosyl radical) are the basis for the division of class I enzymes into subclasses a–d (4, 5). The Ia and Ib enzymes use their dimetal clusters (Fe<sub>2</sub> and Mn<sub>2</sub>, respectively) to oxidize a nearby tyrosine residue to a stable radical (Tyr\*), which serves as the catalytic initiator. The Ic and Id enzymes use a stable, oxidized form of the dimetal cluster itself (Mn/Fe and Mn<sub>2</sub>, respectively) directly for Cys\* generation. The presence of Fe<sup>II</sup> in the Ia and Ic proteins allows them to undergo activation by O<sub>2</sub>; this reaction converts the Fe<sub>2</sub><sup>II/II</sup>-β and Mn<sup>II</sup>/Fe<sup>II</sup>-β complexes to their Fe<sub>2</sub><sup>III/III</sup>-Tyr\* and Mn<sup>IV</sup>/Fe<sup>III</sup> active states. The Mn<sub>2</sub><sup>II/II</sup> complexes of the Ib and Id βs are unreactive toward O<sub>2</sub> and must instead be oxidized by superoxide. For the Ib βs, the superoxide is provided by a flavoprotein activase, NrdI, that binds to β and forms a hydrophilic channel connecting their active sites. The NrdI flavin reduces O<sub>2</sub>, and the channel shepherds the product to the Mn<sub>2</sub><sup>II/II</sup> cluster in β. The ensuing reaction generates the Mn<sub>2</sub><sup>III/III</sup>-Tyr\* active state. The β subunit of the class Id RNR from *Flavobacterium johnsoniae* (Fj) can scavenge superoxide directly from solution to oxidize the Mn<sub>2</sub><sup>III/III</sup>-β complex to the active Mn<sub>2</sub><sup>III/IV</sup> state (5). Accordingly, the genomes of Fj and many other organisms with Id RNRs do not encode NrdI homologs.

The RNR(s) of an organism equip it for its environmental niche (9, 10). For example, both the glycol radical of a class III RNR and the iron-sulfur cluster of its activase are unstable in the presence of O<sub>2</sub>, limiting the enzymes to anaerobes, whereas class I RNRs require O<sub>2</sub> for activation and are functional only in aerobes, including all eukaryotes. *Escherichia coli* (Ec) has both types, expressing its class III enzyme during anaerobic growth and its class Ia enzyme during aerobic growth. Analogously, whereas eukarya possess exclusively iron-dependent class Ia enzymes, the use of manganese-dependent class I (b–d) RNRs appears to equip

bacteria to cope with stresses encountered in their more dynamic niches. For example, the class Ib Ec enzyme sustains replication only under conditions of iron limitation or oxidative stress (11, 12). Thus, Ec mutants with a nonfunctional class Ia RNR subunit are not viable in the presence of O<sub>2</sub> under normal growth conditions, and an Ec strain with a mutation that renders its class Ia α subunit inactive at elevated temperatures (42 °C) has been used as a functional selection for heterologous RNRs (13, 14). The facts that (i) the immune systems of warm-blooded hosts inflict both iron limitation and oxidative stress on an invading bacterium (15) and (ii) class Ib enzymes are highly represented in pathogens (16) have led to the hypothesis that the use of manganese is a specific countermeasure against iron-directed innate immunity. Consistent with this notion, *Streptococcus sanguinis*, an opportunistic pathogen that is normally present in the human mouth but can be unleashed by dental procedures to cause subacute bacterial endocarditis, requires its class Ib RNR, but not its class III enzyme, for virulence in an animal model of the disease (17, 18). It has been suggested that the divergent metal requirements of the human and bacterial RNRs could be leveraged for antibiotic development (18).

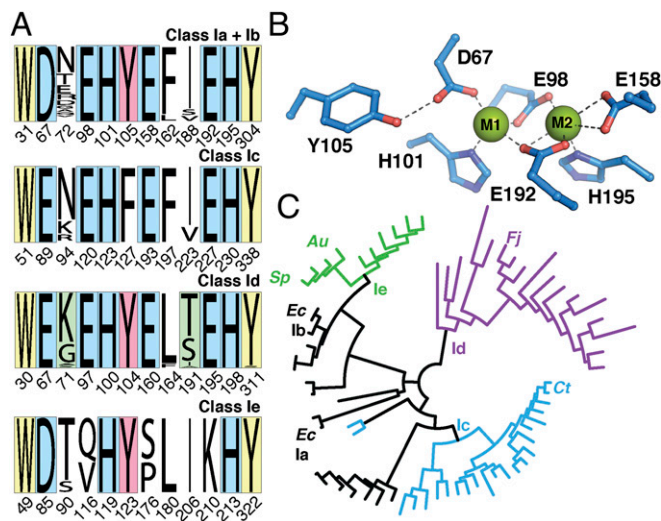
In view of the likely relevance of the diverse radical-initiation chemistry of RNRs to bacterial pathogenesis, we continue to mine sequence databases for orthologs that deploy hitherto unknown strategies. We show here that the β subunits of a pair of class I RNRs from two human pathogens, *Streptococcus pyogenes* (Sp) (19) and *Aerococcus urinae* (Au) (20), lack any transition metal in their active states and use as their initiator a previously unknown stable dihydroxyphenylalanine radical (DOPA•) derived posttranslationally from tyrosine in an NrdI- and O<sub>2</sub>-dependent reaction. These proteins are representative of a larger sequence group of class I RNR βs (class Ie) that are expected to function in the same way and are prevalent in parasitic and commensal organisms (SI Appendix, Fig. S1). Although the Ie βs might still require a single, as-yet unidentified transition metal ion transiently for activation, in either case they would exemplify the most sparing metal use of any known RNR and thus could afford the most effective RNR-based countermeasure yet discovered against transition metal restriction by the host.

## Results and Discussion

### A Group of Active Class I RNRs Lacking Three Glu Metal Ligands in β.

To identify RNRs with unusual cofactors or activation mechanisms, we compiled β sequences (14,807 unique UniProt queries, July 2018) and generated a multiple sequence alignment to mine computationally for examples that fail to conserve residues with established functions (e.g., metal ligands, radical Tyr). Members of a group of 430 sequences all lack three otherwise-conserved metal-coordinating glutamates (Fig. 1A and B, light blue), which are replaced by two hydrophobic residues and a cationic Lys. These β sequences are adjacent to the Ib subclass in molecular phylogeny (Fig. 1C), and, accordingly, almost all of them are encoded close to genes for apparent NrdI activases. Importantly, the associated operon (encoding β-NrdI-α) from Sp, the causative agent of strep throat and scarlet fever, can complement the aforementioned Ia RNR-α temperature-sensitive mutant at the restrictive temperature, as shown by Sjöberg et al. (14), thereby ruling out the possibility that they are nonfunctional, vestigial sequences. We verified that synthetic operons with all three components from either Sp or Au give robust complementation in this assay (SI Appendix, Table S1). We also found that the NrdI component from Au can functionally substitute for Sp NrdI in supporting the in vivo function of the Sp RNR.

To understand how these β proteins can be active despite lacking three metal ligands present in all other orthologs, we expressed (in Ec) N-terminally affinity-tagged Sp and Au β subunits with and without their NrdI activases and purified them chromatographically (SI Appendix, Fig. S2). We also expressed and purified affinity-tagged versions of the cognate α subunits for RNR activity measurements. The β subunits purified following coexpression with an NrdI, including the Sp β coexpressed with the Au activase, were capable of supporting reduction of CDP to dCDP in the presence of the cognate α subunit and DTT (SI Appendix, Figs. S3 and S4).



**Fig. 1.** Bioinformatics analysis of class I RNR β subunits and features of the new Ie subclass. (A) Conservation of residues with roles in radical translocation/electron transfer (yellow), metal coordination (blue), radical formation (red), and control of activation (green) in subclass a–e βs. The residue numbering shown in the four rows of A is based on the sequences of the Ec Ib (Ia/b), *Chlamydia trachomatis* (Ic), *F. johnsoniae* (Id), and Au (Ie) β subunits. (B) Generalized structural depiction of the dimetal site (Ec Ib numbering). (C) Cladogram of representative class I RNR β sequences based on overall sequence identity. Clade coloring: black, class Ia/b with Asp at the first coordination site and Tyr at the radical site; blue, class Ic with Glu and Phe at these sites; purple, class Id with Glu and Tyr; green, class Ie lacking three coordinating Glu residues.



Maximal turnover rates of  $0.35 \text{ s}^{-1} \cdot \beta^{-1}$  were observed (*SI Appendix, Fig. S3*) for the *Sp*  $\beta$ . In contrast, preparations of  $\beta$  proteins obtained following expression in *Ec* in the absence of a NrdI exhibited undetectable activity ( $< 2 \times 10^{-5} \text{ s}^{-1} \cdot \beta^{-1}$ ). The *Sp*- $\beta$ /*Au*-NrdI coexpression system more readily yielded  $\beta$  with minimal contaminating NrdI, with its intensely absorbing flavin (Fig. 2A and *SI Appendix, Fig. S3*); thus, the heterologous system was used to generate the active protein for the spectroscopic analysis presented below.

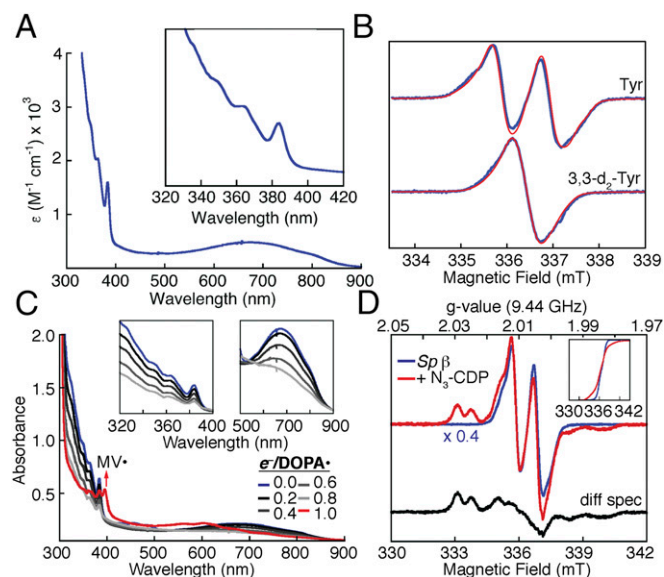
**The Active Class Ie  $\beta$ s Lack Metal and Contain a Dihydroxyphenylalanine Radical (DOPA•).** Preparations of activated (NrdI-coexpressed) *Sp* and *Au*  $\beta$ s exhibited a broad absorption feature at 690 nm and a complex of four sharper peaks at approximately 383, 364, 349, and 337 nm (Fig. 2A and *SI Appendix, Fig. S4*), which were absent from the preparations of unactivated (expressed alone) proteins. The sharpest peak of the complex (383 nm) resembles the hallmark feature of a Tyr•, but its wavelength is less than that for any Tyr• in a class Ia/b RNR (405–417 nm) (*SI Appendix, Fig. S5*). X-band EPR spectra of active preparations also revealed a  $g = 2.0$  (free-radical) EPR signal accounting for 0.4–0.7 spin/ $\beta$  monomer (Fig. 2B and *SI Appendix, Fig. S4*), comparable to the levels of Tyr• reported in class Ia/b enzymes (4). Use of protein containing  $\beta$ -[ $^2\text{H}_2$ ]-Tyr caused a narrowing characteristic of the replacement of a strong doublet splitting from a  $^1\text{H}$  nucleus with a smaller (unresolved) splitting from  $^2\text{H}$  (21). Reductive titration of the active *Sp*  $\beta$  protein with dithionite (Fig. 2C) or treatment with the radical-quenching class I RNR inhibitor, hydroxyurea (*SI Appendix, Fig. S6*) (22), caused loss of these spectral signatures, implying that they all arise from the same Tyr-derived radical species, which the difference in absorption energies suggested could not be a simple Tyr•. The importance of this radical to catalysis was ascertained by use of the 2'-azido-2'-deoxynucleoside 5'-diphosphate ( $\text{N}_3$ -NDP) substrate analog (Fig. 2D) (23, 24).  $\text{N}_3$ -NDPs ( $\text{N}_3$ -CDP,  $\text{N}_3$ -UDP) irreversibly reduce the initiator in  $\beta$  (23, 24) and produce a metastable nitrogen-centered radical ( $\text{N}^\bullet$ ) (25) in  $\alpha$  when processed by a class I RNR (5, 24, 26). Analogously, treatment of the active *Sp* enzyme with  $\text{N}_3$ -CDP resulted in loss of approximately 60% of the original EPR signal

and development of equivalent integrated intensity of the  $\text{N}^\bullet$  signal, thus establishing the Tyr-derived radical as the initiator for the new Ie subclass. Analysis of the active preparations for relevant metals revealed none present at  $>0.15$  equiv per radical (*SI Appendix, Table S2*). Furthermore, the total transition metal content was less than the quantity of radical. The results indicate that class Ie  $\beta$ s are metal-independent after activation in vivo.

We verified the absence of any transition metal in the active state and garnered insight into the structure of the Tyr-derived radical by X-ray crystallographic analysis (*SI Appendix, Table S3*) of activated and unactivated forms of *Au*  $\beta$ , which formed high-quality crystals more readily than the *Sp* protein. Structures solved at 1.6-Å resolution showed no density attributable to a metal ion in either form (Fig. 3A and *SI Appendix, Fig. S7*) and confirmed that the substitution of the three Glu ligands is not compensated for by a change in protein fold that introduces other ligands to preserve metal site 2. Moreover, the structures revealed that the ammonium group of the Lys that replaces a Glu ligand comes to occupy the usual location of the site 1 metal ion (*SI Appendix, Fig. S8*) (27–29), thus rationalizing the complete absence of metal. Exclusively in the structure of the activated form, clear  $F_o - F_c$  difference density could be observed near one of the carbons ( $\text{C}_3$ ) *ortho* to the hydroxyl group of Tyr123 (*SI Appendix, Fig. S7B*), revealing hydroxylation of Tyr123 to dihydroxyphenylalanine (DOPA) in the activation process. Evidence of the modification was observed in all four  $\beta$  subunits of the asymmetric unit (*SI Appendix, Figs. S7C and S9A*), but differences in the electron density maps suggested that one or more of the monomers could have been in an intermediate state of the activation process or have lost its radical.

We next used mass spectrometry to characterize the Tyr123 modification. Initial whole-protein analysis of *Au* and *Sp*  $\beta$  suggested gains in mass of  $15.7 \pm 0.7$  Da and  $15.5 \pm 0.6$  Da, respectively, on activation (*SI Appendix, Table S4*), consistent with the +16-Da change expected for hydroxylation. Proteolysis of activated and unactivated forms of both *Sp* and *Au*  $\beta$  (sequentially treated with trypsin and endopeptidase GluC), chromatographic separation of peptides, and sequencing by high-resolution mass-spectrometric fragmentation (LC-MS/MS) provided data in support of the site of modification and the chemical identity deduced by crystallography (Fig. 3B). An unbiased search (30) of all MS2 spectra for four or more of the  $y$ -ions expected to result from the predicted 13-mer peptide containing Tyr123 allowed its identification in both activated and unactivated preparations. The masses of the dominant ions for the peptides from the activated *Sp* and *Au*  $\beta$  preparations were within 1.0 and 1.7 ppm of those predicted for the Cys-carbamidomethylated, Tyr123-hydroxylated 13-mer in its quinone form ( $[\text{M}+\text{H}]^+ = 1,465.6164$  Da for *Sp* and 1479.6333 Da for *Au*) (Fig. 3B and *SI Appendix, Fig. S10 and Table S5*). Observation of the quinone, rather than DOPA itself, is expected, given that the analysis was performed in air. For the *Sp* protein, an additional modification, consistent with iodination of the DOPA123 quinone during Cys-alkylation by excess iodoacetamide, was also observed (*SI Appendix, Fig. S10*). In neither system could a Tyr123-modified peptide be detected in the unactivated  $\beta$  sample expressed without NrdI.

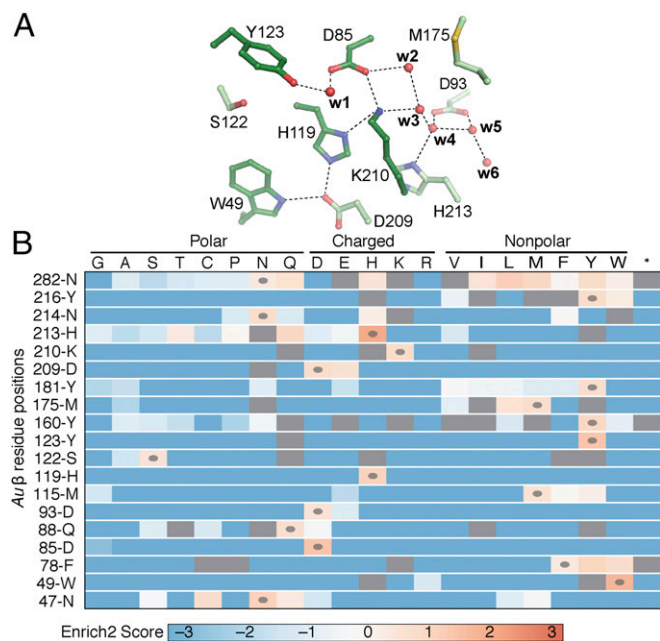
Without tuning by its active-site environment (e.g., by control of protonation state), the DOPA radical (DOPA•) implicated by the crystallographic and LC-MS/MS data would not be expected to have a reduction potential sufficient for its generation of Cys• (31, 32). Thus, it was important to verify the structure of the modified Tyr123 species in its functional, radical state. We performed a series of Q-band  $^1\text{H}$  ENDOR measurements on activated *Sp*  $\beta$  prepared with various Tyr isotopologs (Fig. 4). We detected six distinct  $^1\text{H}$  hyperfine interactions and, for all but one, determined the associated coupling constants. Representative spectra measured at the field position corresponding to the maximum EPR absorption of the radical are shown in Fig. 4; the complete set of orientation-selected ENDOR and high-field EPR measurements, along with associated analysis, are also provided (*SI Appendix, Figs. S11–S14*).



**Fig. 2.** Chemical and spectroscopic analysis of the radical oxidant in the class Ie *Sp* RNR  $\beta$ . (A) UV-visible absorption spectrum. (B) EPR spectra of *Sp*  $\beta$  (blue) and global simulations thereof (red), with natural-abundance Tyr (Top) and  $\beta$ -[ $^2\text{H}_2$ ]-Tyr (Bottom). (C) Spectrophotometrically monitored reductive titration by dithionite. (D) Loss of the radical oxidant and production of the nitrogen-centered radical ( $\text{N}^\bullet$ ; black spectrum) on treatment of the holoenzyme with  $\text{N}_3$ -CDP. (Insets) The double integral of the  $-/+ \text{N}_3$ -dCDP spectra, accounting for  $>98\%$  of the total spin. Procedures and sample compositions are described in *SI Appendix*.







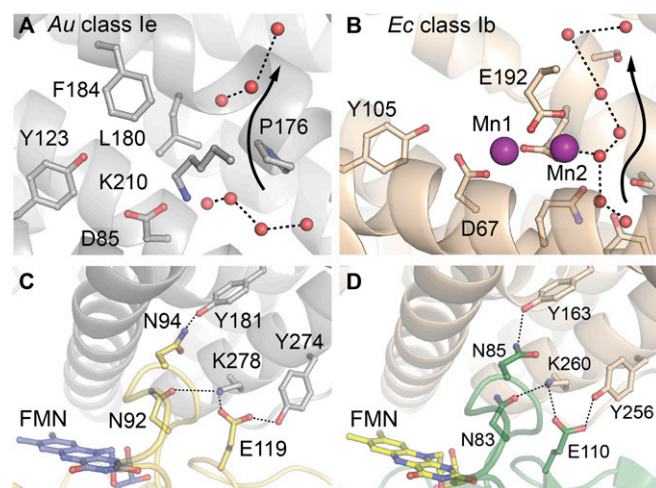
**Fig. 5.** Results of DMS of *Au*  $\beta$  at 19 selected sites. (A) Sites near the DOPA• that are intolerant to substitution. Selected side chains and water molecules are shown as ball-and-stick models and spheres, respectively, and color-coded by atom type and degree of substitution tolerance (dark green, intolerant to substitution; light green, moderately tolerant to conservative substitutions). (B) Amino acid enrichment/depletion map of inferred mutational tolerance of targeted residues. Red boxes (positive scores) indicate mutations highly enriched by selective growth at 42 °C; blue boxes (negative scores), mutations highly depleted by selective growth; gray boxes, mutations not tested due to incomplete coverage during library construction. Ovals indicate the wild-type residues at each site. One-letter amino acid codes are used. The stop codon TAG is indicated by an asterisk (\*).

stop codon) for each site, and assembled them into the complementation plasmid. After transformation of the selection strain, KK444, amplicon libraries from preselection (28 °C) and post-selection (42 °C) populations were pooled and sequenced on the Illumina HiSeq platform. No functionally competent substitution for Tyr123, the site of DOPA• installation, was identified (Fig. 5B) in this experiment.

To assess the basis for the redox tuning of the DOPA• expected to be required for it to generate the Cys• in  $\alpha$ , we included the adjacent residues, Asp85 and Lys210, in the DMS assay. Neither residue can be substituted with any other natural amino acid present in the initial library without loss of *in vivo* function, as judged by the ability to complement the temperature-sensitive mutant strain at the restrictive temperature. Inspection of the X-ray structure suggests that one of the Asp85 side-chain carboxylate O-atoms makes a short H-bond with the newly installed O-atom of DOPA123 (SI Appendix, Fig. S17). Comparison of the positioning of DOPA relative to Asp85 in each of the four chains of the asymmetric unit in the activated *Au*  $\beta$  crystals (Fig. 3A and SI Appendix, Fig. S7) reveals two distinct states, I and II, of the DOPA/Asp85 dyad. One of these states could represent an intermediate, as in a form that undergoes hydroxylation but not further oxidation to the radical, in a two-step activation process. Alternatively, failed activation events or adventitious reduction to the inactive DOPA state in a fraction of the monomers could account for the differences. In all structures, the other Asp85 side-chain oxygen H-bonds to the side chain of Lys210. These interactions would maintain both the DOPA• and the Lys210 nitrogen in their protonated forms (SI Appendix, Fig. S17). In general, a proximal positive charge should elevate the reduction potential of the DOPA•. Residues His119 and Trp49, also intolerant to every substitution sampled

in the DMS experiment (Fig. 5 and SI Appendix, Fig. S16), form a water-mediated H-bonding network between Lys210 and the protein surface (SI Appendix, Fig. S17), and they likely play roles in controlling proton transfer(s) coupled to the  $\alpha$ -Cys-to-DOPA• electron transfer that initiates turnover (8). The radical-translocation process in class Ia RNRs involves the transfer of a proton from a water molecule coordinated to the Fe(III) ion in site 1 to the oxygen of the Tyr• (35). The lack of a transition metal in the active state of the class Ie RNR necessitates a different proton donor and pathway if, as expected, reduction of the DOPA• is coupled to proton transfer to the C<sub>4</sub> O-atom.

The inferred transformation of the class Ie  $\beta$  protein by its NrdI activase—formally, hydroxylation and removal of an additional electron from a Tyr residue—is quite different from that effected in the class Ib system (Mn<sub>2</sub><sup>II/III</sup> oxidation on the path to Tyr•) (4, 36), raising the possibility that the two NrdIs might have different modes of action. However, the structure of the *Au* NrdI<sub>ox</sub> (1.95-Å resolution) (SI Appendix, Fig. S18) shares with previously characterized Ib NrdI proteins (especially the *Ec* ortholog) (28) several functionally important features (SI Appendix, Figs. S18–S20). For example, a Gly-rich FMN-binding loop (50s loop) in *Au* NrdI donates a backbone N-H to H-bond with N5 of the flavin, an interaction that significantly occludes the O<sub>2</sub>-reactive C<sub>4a</sub> position (SI Appendix, Fig. S18). In *Ec* NrdI, the 50s loop opens on FMN reduction, and the C<sub>4a</sub> position becomes more exposed. The redox-dependent change controls reaction of the flavin with oxygen/superoxide (28, 36). Conservation of the loop in *Au* NrdI weighs in favor of O<sub>2</sub> reduction to superoxide or peroxide by the class Ie activase. Moreover, a model for the *Au*  $\beta$ -NrdI complex, which we generated using the structure of the corresponding Ib *Ec* complex [Protein Data Bank (PDB) ID code 3N3A] (28) as a template, shows that the Ie  $\beta$  protein shares two defining structural adaptations of the Ib  $\beta$ s that enable (i) their complexation with NrdI and (ii) guidance of the reactive, hydrophilic oxidant (superoxide) to the buried cofactor site. The model is consistent with use of identical protein–protein interfaces in the Ib and Ie  $\beta$ -activase complexes; residues predicted to interact at the interface are highly conserved (Fig. 6A and B). The second feature, a chain of hydrogen-bonded water molecules in Ie  $\beta$  lining the proposed pathway for superoxide migration, is also retained, interrupted only by the side chain of the Pro that replaces a Glu metal ligand in Ie proteins (Fig. 6C and D). In addition, a strictly conserved surface Lys residue in Ib  $\beta$  (K260) (Fig. 6D), a key



**Fig. 6.** (A and B) Solvent access channels in  $\beta$  and  $\beta$ -NrdI interfaces in the class Ie *Au* and class Ib *Ec* RNR systems. Channels in *Au*  $\beta$  (A) and *Ec* class Ib  $\beta$  (PDB ID code 3N37) (B). (C and D) NrdI- $\beta$  interfaces proposed for the *Au* complex from the structural model constructed in this study (C) and observed in the structure of *Ec* Ib  $\beta$ -NrdI (PDB ID code 3N3A) (D).

component of the NrdI interface proposed to guide the anionic superoxide to the  $Mn_2^{II/III}$  cluster, is also present in the Ie  $\beta$ . These observations are all consistent with similar roles for the Ie and Ib NrdI proteins.

Important aspects of the mechanism of activation of the new class Ie  $\beta$  remain to be resolved. For example, it is not clear whether the three-electron oxidation of Tyr123 to DOPA• requires a transition metal—as in the posttranslational installation of most known quinocofactors (37)—that subsequently dissociates or requires no metal assistance at all. In the former case, the transient metal requirement would be reminiscent of the activation mechanism of a class III RNR [iron-dependent installation of a catalytic Gly• in a metal-free RNR (7)] and would render the class Ie enzymes the aerobic counterpart of this catalytic metal usage. Similarly, the identity and stoichiometry of the (presumably)  $O_2$ -derived oxidant(s) are not known, although the structural analogy to the Ib systems and the fact that DOPA• production is a three-electron oxidation make the use of a single equivalent of superoxide the simplest possibility. Interestingly, a structure of *Au*  $\beta$  solved with thiocyanate as additive reveals the ion bound noncovalently in a pocket immediately adjacent to the Lys210-Asp85-Tyr123 triad (*SI Appendix, Fig. S21*). The similarity of thiocyanate to superoxide in size, structure, and charge raises the possibility that this pocket binds the oxidant before its reaction with Tyr123 or a transiently bound metal ion.

## Methods

Detailed information on metal analysis, spectroscopy, X-ray crystallography, mass spectrometry, and mutational scanning is provided in *SI Appendix*. A summary is provided here.

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