Ion Induced Changes in the Structure of Bordered Pit Membranes

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<td>Published Version</td>
<td>doi:10.3389/fpls.2012.00055</td>
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Ion induced changes in the structure of bordered pit membranes

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INTRODUCTION

Self-actuating hybrid materials are used in a wide range of micro-devices ranging from flux control in microfluidic systems using gels (Beebe et al., 2000) to shape memory actuators (Vyawahare et al., 2008). The growing interest in the use of “smart materials” results from the fact that such materials do not require external triggers, rather they simply respond to changes in their surroundings. Such autonomously acting materials occur within the plant vascular network. Trees must move large volumes of water from soil to atmosphere to sustain photosynthetic activity. Because the movement of water through the plant vascular system occurs via specialized micro-channels composed of dead cells arranged in series. The ability of these cells to respond to the ionic concentration in the transpiration stream allows the seemingly dead xylem micro-channels to modulate their hydraulic properties (Zwieniecki et al., 2001). Bordered pit membranes create a porous boundary between adjacent micro-channels, that prevents the spread of embolism that could halt water transport from soil to leaves and ultimately cause plant death. Pit membranes are a composite material that includes cellulose, lignin, hemicelluloses, and pectin hydrogels (Zwieniecki and Holbrook, 2006; Liu et al., 2004). It also provides a significant hydraulic resistance to xylem sap flow that was shown to be variable in response to sap ion concentration.

Research on the structure and function of bordered pit membranes most often consists of either the indirect study of their properties by inferring them from analysis of liquid fluxes across plant stem segments (Zwieniecki et al., 2001) or scanning electron microscope (SEM) observation of dry plant material (Choat et al., 2006). This comes from the fact that bordered pit membranes are very small (~5 μm diameter) and hidden among overarching heavy cellulose-lignin walls that prevent easy access to membrane surface. More importantly, bordered pit membranes in vivo are immersed in water and in an intact plant, cations in the surrounding solution “open” the bordered pit membrane, facilitating the movement of water. This observed hydraulic activity is the bases for the hydrogel hypothesis that the positive ion shrinks the hydrogel (pectin) covering the nanofibrils of membrane changing its porosity. However, hydraulic measurements do not provide direct evidence of physical bases for the altered flow resistance change. SEM makes it possible to image the nano-fibers but this is usually done using imprints or visualizing dried samples imaged in high vacuum (Jansen et al., 2009). Using environmental SEM it is possible to image bordered pit membranes in humid air at some level of hydration but never under water and never with the resolution needed (Kirk et al., 2009). Recently, new insights into bordered pit membrane structural properties have been obtained using atomic force microscopy (AFM) on air-dry material (Pesacreta et al., 2005;
A MFP-3D-BIO™ Atomic Force Microscope (Asylum Research, Inc.) was used in the tapping mode to image hydrated bordered pit membranes. Sectioned samples were mounted in the closed fluid cell of the AFM using double-sided tape (3M). Bodered pit samples were submerged and imaged first in DI water followed by imaging in 50 mM KCl (Sigma Aldrich, NE). The cantilever tip was kept in the same position to allow for visualization of pit membrane structure resulting from alterations in the ionic concentration of the liquid medium. The sample and AFM cantilever were aligned using an Olympus 1 x 81 inverted microscope (Olympus Inc.). A 60 μm long silicon nitride bio-lever (Olympus Inc.) provided the necessary flexibility for working with submerged samples. Scan rate was 0.3 Hz, around four to five times slower than with dry samples, with scan speed corresponding to the size of the image. The second harmonic resonance frequency was 51.8 kHz and the image resolution was 512 by 512.

RESULTS

BORDERED PIT MEMBRANE IN DI WATER

Atomic force microscopy revealed that the hydrated pit membrane is covered with a relatively disorganized material. Surprisingly, distinct microfibrils, which are usually quite obvious in SEM images (Figure 1A), were not observed. Instead, elevation images reveal a bumpy, but relatively featureless surface across the entire pit membrane (Figure 1B). The roughness of the surface was determined using:

\[
\sqrt{\frac{1}{\sum_{n=1}^{n} (y_i - \bar{y})^2}},
\]

where \( n \) is the number of analyzed pixels, \( y \) is measured height and \( \bar{y} \) is the height average. Average roughness was 12.6 nm with \( SD = 2.18 \) and \( N = 10 \) (\( N \) is the number of independent roughness determinations). The surface of the border pits lacked any visible holes or voids, which are often reported from analysis of dry samples.

The relatively featureless structure of the material covering border pit membranes and lack of the visible cellulotic fibers found on dry imprints of the membranes in SEM studies raises the question of the physical properties of this surface covering. We believe that the microfibrils are hidden inside this material and that under dry conditions the material collapses, behaving as hydrogel. To determine if this hypothesis was true we adjusted the AFM tip position such that the AFM tip penetrated deeper into the covering material. During the tapping mode, AFM is designed to keep the position from the sample by feedback control. The position from the surface is determined by the set point, which is typically 80% of free amplitude (a delicate tap that results in very low tip displacement). To probe deeper into the pit membrane we reduced this set point to 55%. If the covering of the surface was a hard material, the randomness and relative lack of features on the image should remain similar to what was observed using a set point equal to 80% of free amplitude. Alternatively, the increase of force would result in AFM tip damage (as happen in every case on vessel wall). How ever, with bordered pits the decrease in free amplitude revealed fiber like structures under the softer cover (Figure 2). The presence of scratch marks across the image may have resulted from material adhering to the tip being dragged along in the scanning direction.

BORDERED PIT MEMBRANE IN KCl

Replacing DI water with a 50 mM KCl solution resulted in an immediate and marked change in membrane structure. We chose...
50 mM KCl based on previous experience that this concentration results in the maximum effect on membrane hydraulic properties (Zwieniecki et al., 2001). Upon exposure to 50 mM KCl, the cantilever tip had to be moved downward around several hundred nanometers to have the same set point. This suggests that the top surface of the bordered pit membrane also moved downward. This drop may indicate the collapse of the soft material. In support of this, the surface was much harder and the microfibrils more exposed (Figure 3). We did not observe the formation of any holes or cracks in the membrane that could have contributed to a lower hydraulic resistance. Instead, the major changes observed included a drop in height which can be interpreted as a decrease in overall membrane thickness (Figure 4) and a significant increase in surface roughness. The average roughness of bordered pit surface increased from 12.6 (in DI water) to 16.6 nm (SD = 1.36 and N = 10; in 50 mM KCl). This change was significant with t-value = 4.94, df = 18, and p < 0.001. The increase in mean roughness is consistent with a reduction in membrane thickness. We also observed a change in the signal to noise ratio from 4.2 to 5.5 determined as mean to SD. This change in signal to noise ration was consistent with the presence of harder structures, such as microfibrils, covered by a thinner layer of hydrogel.

DISCUSSION
Comparative analysis of pit membrane surface properties in DI water and 50 mM KCl revealed several important and unexpected properties that enhance our understanding of how water moves through this hybrid material. The current paradigm portrays pit membranes as a microfiber network with discrete holes (Kiss et al., 2009). This view is supported by SEM observations of dry material. In contrast our observation of fully hydrated pit membranes did
not reveal any holes, but instead a continuous surface of soft material covering fibers with well pronounced elevation features. Upon transfer from DI water to 50 mM KCl, this soft surface underwent a conformational change in its physical properties from soft to hard and from thick to thin, a behavior that is consistent with the properties of hydrogel (Tanaka, 1981). We believe that this observation provides strong support for the notion that bordered pit membranes are composite materials formed from fibrous structure submerged in amorphous gel.

This seemingly simple observation has important implications for our understanding of the hydraulic properties of bordered pit membranes. In particular, it suggests that water does not flow through discrete holes or pores, but instead has to pass through the soft gel (pectin) matrix. Thus, the physical description of water transport across pit membranes in most angiosperms may be similar to what occurs in bio-inspired materials that can sustain tension and operate in a similar manner to xylem or leaves (Noblin et al., 2008; Wheeler and Stroock, 2008). In particular, we may need to change our models for how tension is generated in leaves, as well as how the embolism spreads in the xylem, from ones dominated by surface tension and meniscal failure to ones that emphasize the osmotic forces that can occur within hydrogels.

This study also shifts our understanding of how pit membrane hydraulic permeability is altered in response to ionic strength of xylem sap. Increase in hydraulic conductance may result from changes in membrane thickness (shortening the water path across the membrane) and changes in permeability of the charged hydrogel (Mattern et al., 2008), while previously proposed changes in the dimension of channels might be less influential (Zwieniecki et al., 2001). This finding underscores the role of pit membranes in protection from embolism as ionic strength does not necessarily decrease the pressure threshold for the air to pass from one vessel to another (Cochard et al., 2010). In addition, the observed composite nature of the pit membrane explains their ability to recover from mechanical damage (Sperry and Hacke, 2004), as changes in gel hydration allow cellulose microfibrils to shift within the network and thus prevent the formation of permanent holes or cracks. Such healing properties are especially important for plants that sustain multiple cycles of embolism and embolism removal during drought stress (Sperry and Hacke, 2004). The conformational response of pit membranes to variation in ionic strength reported here suggests that we need to replace the current emphasis on the structural framework provided by the cellulose microfibrils to flow models dominated by the properties of the gel matrix (Wheeler and Stroock, 2008).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is a pleasure to thank Dr. Jiangdong Deng at Center for Nanoscale System in Harvard University and Dr. Hong Sik Park at Brown University for many useful discussions of advanced use for AFM. This work was supported by the Materials Research Science and Engineering Center at Harvard University and a grant from the Air Force Office of Sponsored Research.

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Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Received: 02 November 2011; paper pending published: 18 November 2011; accepted: 01 March 2012; published online: 21 March 2012.


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