Kinetics of Hydrogen Atom Abstraction from Substrate by an Active Site Thiyl Radical in Ribonucleotide Reductase

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INTRODUCTION

Managing the coupled translocation of protons and electrons is the keystone to energy storage and conversion. Biological systems have evolved to capitalize on proton-coupled electron transfer (PCET) to execute energy conversions efficiently and with exquisite control. E. coli class Ia ribonucleotide reductase (RNR) catalyzes the conversion of nucleotides to deoxynucleotides in all organisms. Active E. coli class Ia RNR is an α·β2 complex that undergoes reversible, long-range proton-coupled electron transfer (PCET) over a pathway of redox active amino acids (β·Y122 → [β·W43] → β·Y156 → α·Y731 → α·C439) that spans ∼35 Å. To unmask PCET kinetics from rate-limiting conformational changes, we prepared a photochemical RNR containing a [Re3+] photooxidant site-specifically incorporated at position 355 ([Re3+]β3), adjacent to PCET pathway residue Y356 in β. [Re3+]β3 was further modified by replacing Y356 with 2,5,5-trifluorotyrosine to enable photochemical generation and spectroscopic observation of chemically competent tyrosyl radical(s). Using transient absorption spectroscopy, we compare the kinetics of Y· decay in the presence of substrate and wt-α2, Y731F-α2 or C439S-α2, as well as with 3′-[2H]-substrate and wt-α2. We find that only in the presence of wt-α2 and the unlabeled substrate do we observe an enhanced rate of radical decay indicative of forward radical propagation. This observation reveals that cleavage of the 3′-C–H bond of substrate by the transiently formed C439· thiyl radical is rate-limiting in forward PCET through α and has allowed calculation of a lower bound for the rate constant associated with this step of (1.4 ± 0.4) × 104 s−1. Prompting radical propagation with light has enabled observation of PCET events heretofore inaccessible, revealing active site chemistry at the heart of RNR catalysis.

ABSTRACT: Ribonucleotide reductases (RNRs) catalyze the conversion of nucleotides to deoxynucleotides in all organisms. Active E. coli class Ia RNR is an α·β2 complex that undergoes reversible, long-range proton-coupled electron transfer (PCET) over a pathway of redox active amino acids (β·Y122 → [β·W43] → β·Y156 → α·Y731 → α·C439) that spans ∼35 Å. To unmask PCET kinetics from rate-limiting conformational changes, we prepared a photochemical RNR containing a [Re3+] photooxidant site-specifically incorporated at position 355 ([Re3+]β3), adjacent to PCET pathway residue Y356 in β. [Re3+]β3 was further modified by replacing Y356 with 2,5,5-trifluorotyrosine to enable photochemical generation and spectroscopic observation of chemically competent tyrosyl radical(s). Using transient absorption spectroscopy, we compare the kinetics of Y· decay in the presence of substrate and wt-α2, Y731F-α2 or C439S-α2, as well as with 3′-[2H]-substrate and wt-α2. We find that only in the presence of wt-α2 and the unlabeled substrate do we observe an enhanced rate of radical decay indicative of forward radical propagation. This observation reveals that cleavage of the 3′-C–H bond of substrate by the transiently formed C439· thiyl radical is rate-limiting in forward PCET through α and has allowed calculation of a lower bound for the rate constant associated with this step of (1.4 ± 0.4) × 104 s−1. Prompting radical propagation with light has enabled observation of PCET events heretofore inaccessible, revealing active site chemistry at the heart of RNR catalysis.
constructs, the \( \beta \) subunit was replaced by a short peptide encompassing the \( \alpha \)-terminal residues of the \( \beta \) protein. More recently, we have developed a \( \beta \) subunit in which three \( \beta \)-2-oH-substrate and wt-\( \alpha \)-2, as well as with [3′-H]-substrate and wt-\( \alpha \), we find that only in the presence of wt-\( \alpha \), and substrate with natural isotopic abundance are radical decay kinetics enhanced.

These data support that cleavage of the 3′-C–H bond of substrate by the transiently formed \( \mathrm{C}_{450} \) thyl radical is rate-limiting in forward PCET through \( \alpha \). We report a lower limit for the rate constant associated with this step of \( (1.4 \pm 0.4) \times 10^{9} \) s\(^{-1}\). Unmasking PCET events in the active \( \alpha \beta_2 \) RNR has provided a first direct measure of active site kinetics in the class Ia enzyme, yielding new evidence for a long-standing model and shedding light on the mechanism by which RNR maintains control and specificity during long-range PCET.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Materials. Wt-\( \alpha_2 \) (2000 nmol/mg/min) was expressed from pET28a-\( nrdA \) and purified as previously described.\(^{35} \) Glycerol stocks of Y\( \alpha_2 \)-F3Y and C\( \alpha_2 \)S2-F3Y were available from a previous study\(^{36} \) and were expressed and purified as wt-\( \alpha_2 \). All \( \alpha_2 \) proteins were prerduced prior to use.\(^{21} \) [5-\( ^3 \)H]-cytidine \( \Delta^2 \)-diphosphate sodium salt hydrate ([\( ^3 \)H]-CDP) was purchased from VilTrax (Placentia, CA). 3'-Deuterated cytidine \( \Delta^2 \)-diphosphate ([3′-\( ^2 \)H]-CDP) was available from a previous study,\(^{37} \) in which it was synthesized as reported.\(^{23} \) Tricarbonyl(1,10-phenanthroline)(4-bromomethyl-pyridyl)rhenium(I) hexafluorophosphate ([Re\( ^{\mathrm{I}} \)-Br] was available from a previous study.\(^{22} \) *E. coli* thioredoxin (TR, 40 \( \mu \)mol/min/mg) and thioredoxin reductase (TRR, 1800 \( \mu \)mol/min/mg) were prepared as previously described.\(^{38} \) Tris(2,3,5-trifluoropyrimidin-4-carboxamide) was synthesized enzymatically from pyruvate, ammonia, and 2,3,6-trifluorophenol with tyrosine phenol lyase as the catalyst.\(^{39} \) Assay buffer consists of 50 mM HEPES, 15 mM Mg\( \text{SO}_4 \), and 1 mM EDTA adjusted to the specified pH.

Preparation of [Re]-F3Y2S355C. Construction of C\( \alpha_2 \)S2/C\( \alpha_2 \)S2/S\( \alpha_2 \)S355C/Y\( \alpha_2 \)S355Z-pBAD-nrdB was achieved by site-directed mutagenesis using pBAD-nrdB as a template, and primers listed in the Supporting Information. *E. coli* TOP10 cells were cotransformed with the newly constructed nrdB plasmid and pEVOL-\( \mathrm{F}^\mathrm{a} \)-aaRS obtained from a previous study,\(^{37} \) plated on LB-agar plates supplemented with 100 \( \mu \)g/mL ampicillin and 35 \( \mu \)g/mL chloramphenicol and incubated at 37 °C overnight. A 1 mL culture containing the same antibiotics was inoculated with a single colony, incubated at 37 °C for 10 h, and then used to inoculate a small culture grown overnight at 37 °C. This starter-culture was used to inoculate 4 \times 2 L cultures of 2xYT at a 100-fold dilution. The cells were grown in the presence of 1.5 mM 2,3,5-\( \Delta^2 \)-F3Y until reaching an OD\( _{600} \) of 0.5, at which point the F\( \mathrm{a} \)-aaRS and nrdB genes were induced with arabinose (0.05% w/v). The cells were grown for an additional 4 h to a final OD\( _{600} \) of ~1.5 and then harvested by centrifugation (3000 \( \times \)g, 10 min, 4 °C). Yields of ~2 g/L were obtained. Success of expression was assessed by 10% SDS-PAGE. The protein was purified by anion-exchange chromatography following a previously reported protocol,\(^{40} \) to give 10–15 mg per g of cell paste. Holo-S355C/2,3,5-\( \Delta^2 \)-F3Y\( \alpha_2 \)S355C contained 0.6 Y∥\( \beta \) and exhibited no enzymatic activity. This variant is inactive due to the presence of a thiol/thiolate in the tricysteine mutant, which may be oxidized by F3Y. This quenching process is not a concern in the photoRNR experiments because conjugation to [Re]\( ^{\mathrm{I}} \) results in a thiouore, which is difficult to oxidize. Purified material contained \( \leq 5\% \) \( \beta \)/\( \beta \) heterodimer resulting from the presence of protein truncated at position 356 (a consequence of the method used for unnatural amino acid incorporation). Treatment with hydroxyurea to quantitatively reduce Y\( \alpha_2 \)/\( \beta_2 \) and labeling with [Re]-Br were achieved as reported previously,\(^{29} \) to yield met-[Re]-F3Y\( \alpha_2 \)S355C, exhibiting >95% labeling efficiency.

Steady-State Emission \( \Phi_{\Delta S} \) Titration. The steady-state emission intensity of 5 \( \mu \)M [Re]-F3Y2S355C in the presence of 1 mM CDP, 3 mM ATP, and 20 \( \mu \)M wt-\( \alpha \) was measured in buffer containing 50 mM of either MES (pH 5.2–6.8) or HEPES (pH 7.0–7.6). 15 mM Mg\( \text{SO}_4 \), and 1 mM EDTA. Excitation at 315 nm using a 420 nm long-pass cutoff filter allowed spectra to be recorded over 450–650 nm, scanning 3 times per sample at a rate of 0.1 nm/s and detecting in 0.5 nm steps. Samples were held at 25 °C for 2 min prior to scan and

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**Figure 1.** (a) Pseudotatomic model of the active *E. coli* class Ia RNR \( \alpha_2 \beta_2 \) complex\(^{24,13,32} \) using PDB files 1MXR\(^{33} \) and 4RIX.\(^{34} \) \( \alpha \) (purple and violet) binds substrate (blue), and effector (state), and crystallizes with the 20-mer peptide corresponding to the C-terminal tail of \( \alpha \). \( \beta \) (forest and light green) contains the \( \mu \)-O-Fe\( ^{\mathrm{III}} \)/Y356\( \cdot \) cofactor (Fe, brown; \( \mu \)-O, red). (b) Illustration of photoinitiated radical transport over the PCET pathway in \( \alpha \) (purple), and \( \beta \) (green) via excitation of [Re]\( ^{\mathrm{I}} \) appended to \( \beta \)-S355C and with 2,3,5-F3Y\( \prime \) replacing \( \beta \)-Y356. Residues 340–360 are disordered in the \( \beta \) structure, and the [Re\( ^{\mathrm{I}} \)-Br]-C355-\( \cdot \)Y356 fragment (constructed from the [Re\( ^{\mathrm{I}} \)-Br crystal structure)\(^{29} \) is placed in a hypothetical position (dashed green line) intended for illustrative purposes only.
Throughout the duration of the measurement. Integrated emission intensity was plotted versus pH and fit to eq 1 (Figure S1). Here, $I$ corresponds to integrated emission intensity and $I_{max}$ and $I_0$ correspond to $I$ at pH 7.6 and 5.2 respectively.

$$10^{(pH-pK_a)} = \frac{I - I_0}{I_{max} - I_0}$$ (1)

**Photochemical Turnover.** Single turnover experiments under photochemical conditions were performed by mixing 10 μM each of met-[Re]-F$_2$Y$_2\beta_1$ with wt-α$_2$, Y$_{356}$F-α$_2$, or C$_{439}$S-α$_2$ in the presence of 0.2 mM [5-H]-CDP (specific activity 26,700 cpm/nmol), 1 mM ATP, and 10 mM Ru(NH$_3$)$_6$Cl$_3$ in assay buffer at pH 7.6. Samples were placed in a 4 mm × 4 mm quartz cuvette and held at 25 °C under illumination for 10 min with white light powered at 800 W (35 V and 24 A DC) in conjunction with a 313 nm long-pass cutoff filter. Quantitation of radioactive products by scintillation counting and confirmation of product identity (Figure S2) were performed as previously described. Equivalents of dCDP per turnover cell to reduce sample decomposition. An inline filter probe light before detection to remove scattered 355 nm light. Filters (Acrodisc 13 mm 0.2 μM Supor Membrane, Pall Corporation) was used to collect solid photoproducts. Optical long-pass cutoff filters (λ > 375 nm) were used to filter probe light before detection to remove scattered 355 nm pump light. Samples contained 50 μM [Re]-F$_2$Y$_2\beta_1$; 75 μM of wt-α$_2$, Y$_{356}$F-α$_2$, or C$_{439}$S-α$_2$; 3 mM ATP; and either 1 or 0.5 mM CDP or [3′-H]-CDP.

**Nanosecond Laser Flash Photolysis.** Samples were prepared in a total volume of 750 μL and recirculated through a 1 cm path length flow cell to reduce sample decomposition. An inline filter (Acrodisc 13 mm 0.2 μM Supor Membrane, Pall Corporation) was used to collect solid photoproducts. Optical long-pass cutoff filters (λ > 375 nm) were used to filter probe light before detection to remove scattered 355 nm pump light. Samples contained 50 μM [Re]-F$_2$Y$_2\beta_1$; 75 μM of wt-α$_2$, Y$_{356}$F-α$_2$, or C$_{439}$S-α$_2$; 3 mM ATP; and either 1 or 0.5 mM CDP or [3′-H]-CDP.

**Lifetimes from the decay traces for another three sets of unique samples were then obtained using a second protein preparation (Trial 2 in Table S1).** Lifetimes from the decay traces for three unique samples of a single protein preparation (both wt-α$_2$ and [Re]-F$_2$Y$_2\beta_1$ expression, purification, and [Re]-labeling) (Trial 1 in Table S1), according to eq 2:

$$y = y_0 + A e^{-x/t}$$ (2)

**RESULTS**

pK$_a$ of 2,3,5-F$_3$Y$_{356}$ within the α$_2$β$_2$ Complex. Photochemical generation of an observable population of F$_2$Y$_{356}$ is enhanced when the amino acid resides in its deprotonated state. This enhanced radical generation is a direct consequence of the ability to generate the radical by removal of only an electron as opposed to removal of an electron and proton (i.e., FCET). To determine the optimum pH for photochemical radical generation, we measured the pK$_a$ of F$_2$Y$_{356}$ within the α$_2$/[Re]-Y$_{356}$β$_2$ complex. This measurement was accomplished by monitoring the steady-state emission from the rhenium complex excited state ([Re]$^*$), which is quenched more effectively when the adjacent F$_2$Y is deprotonated. Plotting emission intensity as a function of pH revealed a pK$_a$ of 6.2 ± 0.1 (Figure S1). This value is in line with the pK$_a$ of 6.4 measured for the free amino acid derivative, particularly in light of the fact that a positively charged [Re]$^*$ complex is present. The pK$_a$ measured here is also in line with the value of 6.8 predicted by titrations using 3-NO$_2$Y$_{356}$β$_2$, in which, by comparison with free NO$_2$Y, the ΔpK$_a$ due to perturbations arising from the protein environment at position 356 was inferred. All subsequent spectroscopy was conducted at pH 8.2 such that ~99% of F$_2$Y$_{356}$ is deprotonated.

**Observation of Transient Y**. In order to observe photogenerated Y’s, charge recombination within the initially formed charge-separated state ([Re]$^*$)-F$_2$Y$_{356}$β$_2$ must be prevented. Therefore, we applied flash-quench methodology by including an excess of Ru(NH$_3$)$_6$Cl$_3$ in reaction mixtures. Bimolecular quenching of the [Re]$^*$ excited state furnishes the [Re] complex via reduction of Ru(NH$_3$)$_6$Cl$_3$. This [Re] species is capable of driving rapid oxidation of trifluoro-tyrosinate (Figure 2a). Figure 2b shows the TA spectrum of Y- collected 3 μs after excitation, at which point nearly all photochemistry is completed and F$_2$Y- and/or Y- are the only transient species contributing to the absorption feature centered at 412 nm. The overall photochemical yield of Y- is ~1.9% (calculation included in the Supporting Information). Experiments were performed at protein concentrations such that >97% of [Re]-F$_2$Y$_{356}$β$_2$ is complexed to α$_2$ (based on the previously reported K$_D$ of 0.7 ± 0.1 μM, measured for [Re]-β$_2$ binding to α$_2$ under the same conditions). The control experiment performed with [Re]-Y$_{356}$F-β$_2$ (black, Figure 2b) shows a minor TA signal, which we have previously observed and ascribed to off-pathway generation of Y-. In the absence of an adjacent redox active amino acid, off-pathway radical generation is maximized. Thus, this spectrum (black, Figure 2b) represents a maximum possible contribution to the observed signal and is likely greater than any off-pathway contributions operative when F$_2$Y or Y is present.

**Photochemical Competence for Turnover.** To evaluate the relevance of photochemically generated Y- in RNR chemistry, we sought to verify chemical competence for enzymatic turnover via photochemical initiation. Steady-state illumination under single turnover conditions in the presence of radiolabeled substrate ([5-H]-CDP), effector (ATP), Ru(NH$_3$)$_6$Cl$_3$, and α$_2$ allows quantitation and identification of photogenerated products. Of note, μ-O-F$_{356}$/Y$_{122}$ cofactor of [Re]-F$_2$Y$_{356}$β$_2$ has been reduced with inhibitor hydroxurea to form met-[Re]-F$_2$Y$_{356}$β$_2$ thus the normal mechanism for turnover is not viable with this construct.

### Table 1. Y- Lifetimes for α$_2$-Variant/Substrate Combinations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>α$_2$-variant</th>
<th>substrate</th>
<th>τ/μs*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>wt</td>
<td>CDP</td>
<td>18 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y$_{356}$F</td>
<td>CDP</td>
<td>24 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C$_{439}$S</td>
<td>CDP</td>
<td>25 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wt</td>
<td>[3′-H]-CDP</td>
<td>26 (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Photogenerated Y- lifetimes monitored by TA spectroscopy at 412.5 nm and fit to monoexponential decay from 3 to 765 μs (Figure S5). Weighted averages represent duplicate sets of three measurements each, on two separate protein preparations of [Re]-F$_2$Y$_2\beta_2$ and wt-α$_2$.

The data set, along with fits to eq 2, and associated residuals analysis are included in Figure S3.

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Photochemical production of dCDP is 9 ± 4% that of wt-β2 under identical conditions (Figures 3 and S2), which produces 1.2 dCDP/μM with that of wt-β2 out of a theoretical maximum of 4. Dark controls and reactions with Y731F-α2 and C439S-α2 variants produce negligible amounts of product.

Pathway and Isotope Dependence of Y- Lifetime. We set out to explore individual PCET steps by measuring the kinetic behavior of Y- under different conditions. We compared the lifetime of transiently formed Y (τ) in the presence of CDP, ATP, and wt-α2, with that of τ in the presence of CDP, ATP, and α-variants containing redox-inactive pathway substitutions, as well as in the presence of [3′-H]-CDP, ATP, and wt-α2. Lifetime data were determined from measurements of three unique samples from a single protein preparation of both wt-α2 and [Re]-F3Y-β2 data sets from two protein preparations were measured. Accordingly, the data in Table 1 are the propagated error for the six measurements across the two trials. Of note, the initiation process in which F3Y- is oxidized by [ReII] simply generates the radical on the PCET pathway. All fits to kinetics data begin at 3 μs, after the F3Y- has formed. Thus, by removing the proton dependence of the initiation step, we are able to increase the yield of the radical (by relying only on an ET vs PCET for radical initiation), and we do not alter the PCET mechanism at play during the steps of interest that follow. With the exception of τ measured in the presence of Y731F-α2, the lifetime in each case corresponds to a total signal composed of contributions from F3Y- in β1, Y731F- and Y730- in α2. Similar signal amplitudes were observed at t = 0 within each trial (Table S1), revealing that Y- generation was similar to the different α2 variants and substrates.

We found that the measured lifetime of τ = 18 ± 1 μs for wt-α2 is extended to 24 ± 1 μs for the Y731F-α2 variant, which cannot produce a radical in α2 (Table 1). This observation suggests that the PCET pathway in α introduces an additional route for Y- decay. The significant difference between these two values provides a means of differentiating on- and off-pathway radical decay. The relative kinetics of the productive, on-pathway contribution to the total decay is calculated according to eq 3, where τo represents the lifetime measured in the presence of Y731F-α2. The resultant rate constant (kobs) is (1.4 ± 0.4) × 10^4 s⁻¹.

\[
k_{\text{obs}} = \frac{1}{\tau} - \frac{1}{\tau_0}
\]

In order to understand which processes in α limit the rate of radical transport, we next blocked the interior end of the PCET pathway by using C439S-α2. A lifetime identical to that measured in the presence of Y731F-α2 was observed (Table 1), revealing that the rate-determining step operative in the presence of wt-α2 occurs either during or after oxidation of residue C439. We note, however, that this observation does not reveal whether or not radical injection into the α subunit occurs in the presence of this variant. It could be envisioned that the downstream perturbation to the PCET pathway imposed by the C439S amino acid substitution precludes radical injection entirely. Thus, either radical injection followed by rapid reverse PCET and quenching occurs or injection is precluded. Both possibilities provide evidence for strict conformational control over PCET events. Throughout our analysis we have assumed that, in the presence of wt-α2 and CDP, new routes for on-pathway Y- decay have not been introduced. In all cases, τo is unrestricted in its definition and simply represents the Y- lifetime via any avenue of nonproductive decay. Thus, in calculating k_{obs} we apply the same τo value for nonproductive decay in the case where the productive pathway (turnover) has also been enabled.

Once C439 is oxidized, the ensuing radical abstracts a hydrogen atom from the 3′-position of substrate (Scheme 1). Subsequent loss of a molecule of water from the 2′-position represents the first irreversible step of turnover. This irreversibility renders any subsequent steps inconsequential to the Y- decay rate. Thus, the rate-determining step with respect to Y- decay in our system (namely, where the native pathway through β is overridden) must be either oxidation of C439 or H- abstraction from C3′ of substrate. To differentiate between these two possibilities we next measured τ in the presence of
Scheme 1. Mechanistic Model Describing Y• Decay

\[
\begin{align*}
\alpha - Y_{730} & \rightleftharpoons \alpha - Y_{731} \quad \beta - F_3 Y_{356} \rightarrow Q^{\text{••}} \\
& \quad \text{Decay}
\end{align*}
\]

wt-α2 and [3′-2H]-CDP. Here, a lifetime similar to that observed in the presence of wt-α2 and CDP would suggest that oxidation of C439 by Y730 is rate-determining, because slowing down the subsequent step has no effect on τ. Alternatively, a lifetime intermediate between that observed in the presence of wt-α2 and CDP and that observed in the presence of pathway-blocked variants would indicate that cleavage of the 3′-C–H bond by C439 is rate-limiting. We found that the latter case prevails, and to its extreme extent.

Introduction of deuterium at the 3′-position of substrate completely alters the relative kinetics of the system, resulting in τ statistically identical to τ0 (Table 1). Further, unlike in the case with C439S-α2, here we are using wt-α2 and so no perturbation to the PCET pathway is incurred. Therefore, in this case we do assume that radical injection into α occurs. Observation of this isotope effect (IE) suggests that we have successfully uncoupled radical translocation from conformational gating, thus allowing for the first direct measure of PCET kinetics within the αβζ complex.

**DISCUSSION**

More than 30 years ago [3′-2H]-NDPs were used to investigate the mechanism of RNR. Small amounts of RNR-mediated 3H2O release and [V/K] isotope effects provided strong evidence that 3′-C–H bond cleavage occurs during NDP reduction. This study also established that the first irreversible step during a single turnover occurs after hydrogen atom abstraction from substrate and formed the underpinning for the mechanistic model shown in Scheme 1 (intermediates 2–4) and Figure S4.

Stepwise PCET between Tyr-O• → Cys-S• → R3C• akin to the interconversion of 1 → 2 → 3 in Scheme 1 seems contrary to thermodynamic favor (bond dissociation energies of PhO–H, RS–H, and HOCH2–H are ~86, 91, and 94 kcal/mol, respectively). However, a central tenet of the model proposed in Scheme 1 is that enzymatic coupling of endergonic steps to an irreversible reaction can provide a means of overcoming thermodynamic hurdles. The irreversible and entropically favored release of a molecule of water from the 2′-position of substrate (e.g., 3 → 4 in Scheme 1) is postulated to drive the RNR reaction forward as and when small amounts of intermediate 3 are formed from the reversible steps leading up to it. The loss of a rate enhancement for Y· decay in the presence of [3′-2H]-CDP reveals a primary IE on the cleavage of the substrate 3′-C–H bond, providing direct evidence in support of this model.

The steps in the RNR mechanism that are relevant to the current experiment are outlined in Scheme 1. We note that radical translocation in our system is initiated midstream along the PCET pathway; thus steps within the β subunit are inconsequential. Here, 1 accounts for our experimental observable, a composite signal of unknown relative contributions from F3Y356 in β, Y731, and Y730 in α2. Reoxidation of F3Y356 by Y731 is predicted to be ~110 mV uphill at pH 8.2 based on the relative potentials of these amino acids in solution. Yet, experiments in RNR suggest that Y356 is ~100 mV easier to oxidize than Y731 within the subunit interface. Similarly, Y731 and Y730 have been predicted, and experimentally shown, to be isoenergetic within the enzyme complex. Thus, all of these radical species have been drawn as reversibly interconverting and reduction of intermediate 1 by an off-pathway quencher, Q, can potentially occur by way of any of these radical intermediates.

On-pathway Y· decay occurs by oxidation of C439 to give intermediate 2. Upon oxidation, C439 reversibly abstracts H· from the 3′-position of substrate to generate 3. General base (E441) and acid (C225) catalysis facilitate dehydration from the 2′-position to yield the 2′-αketyl radical intermediate (4). Despite the fact that active site chemical transformations following the formation of 4 ultimately result in the regeneration of C439 and reverse PCET to reform 1 (Figure S4), these processes occur on a much slower time scale (~100 s−1) than under examination here. Accordingly, 1 is not expected to reform during the time course of the experiment. Thus, 4 represents a terminal product with respect to Y· decay and the mechanistic steps relevant to our experimental conditions are limited to the interconversion of species 1–4 in Scheme 1.

Our results comparing τ in the presence of [3′-2H]-CDP versus CDP reveal that the rate enhancement for nonlabeled CDP occurs after oxidation of C439. However, the implications of the reversibility of the oxidation of C439 on the radical lifetimes of 1 must be considered. With little kinetic information regarding the equilibrium between 1 and 2, we turn to small molecule model studies in which the kinetics of bimolecular oxidation of Cys by Tyr were examined by pulse radiolysis. These studies report a rate constant of 2 × 109 M−1 s−1 and that the reverse reaction (oxidation of Tyr by Cys·) is significantly faster. These results suggest that a pre-equilibrium may be established between intermediates 1 and 2 in our system and facilitates an estimate for the magnitude of the corresponding equilbrium constant, K12 (k1/k−1), from thermodynamic values. Electrochemical measurements of tyrosine and glutathione reveal that cysteine and tyrosine have approximately equal midpoint potentials at pH 7.0 (0.94 ± 0.04 V and 0.93 ± 0.02 V, respectively). However, calculations based on a trapped form of the active RNR complex suggest that oxidation of C439 by Y730 is endergonic by 3–4 kcal/mol, resulting in K12 ≈ 10−2.67. Taken together, these
studies support that 2 is formed reversibly from 1 and that the resultant equilibrium constant is $\leq 1$. We note that 2 has never been observed or trapped in a class I enzyme, indicating that this intermediate is likely consumed upon its formation. This scenario renders $k_{obs}$ a lower bound for $k_2$ where the extent to which the actual $k_2$ is greater than $k_{obs}$ increases as $K_{eq}$ decreases from unity.

The reversibility of H atom abstraction may also lead to a case where $k_1$ is greater than $k_{obs}$. The extent to which this manifest depends upon the efficiency with which 3 proceeds forward as a fraction of its total decay. This efficiency can be described by a net rate constant equal to $k_3/(k_{-3}+k_3)$, which has a maximum value of 1. Reactions similar to both of the processes described by $k_{-3}$ and $k_3$ have been studied extensively, producing rate constants ranging from $10^{-9}$ to $10^{-8}$ M$^{-1}$ s$^{-1}$, 52–56 and $10^6$ to $10^8$ s$^{-1}$ 57–59 for $k_{-3}$ and $k_3$, respectively. Though it is difficult to compare bimolecular reactions in solution to those within an enzyme active site, we note that these values are all $10^{-4}$ to $10^{-3}$-fold faster than the corresponding bimolecular rate constants akin to conversion of the $\beta$-subunit capable of generating observable transient Y-species within the $\alpha_2\beta_2$ complex. With this construct, we have observed an IE on cleavage of the substrate $3^\prime$-C–H bond, revealing that this step is rate-limiting with respect to Y propagation through $\alpha$ and allowing us to report a lower bound for the rate constant associated with this step of $(1.4 \pm 0.4) \times 10^4$ s$^{-1}$. Unmasking PCET events in the active $\alpha_2\beta_2$ RNR has provided a first measure of active site kinetics in the class Ia enzyme, yielding new evidence for a long-standing model and shedding light on the mechanism by which RNR maintains control and specificity during long-range radical transport.

The fact that C–H bond cleavage from substrate by the transiently formed C$_{4\alpha}$ occurs at $10^4$ s$^{-1}$, along with previous results, reveals that PCET events occur rapidly during radical translocation. Together with recent findings that implicate alignment of the PCET pathway as a target of conformational gating, 13,18,47 these results suggest that the reaction profile of the active $\alpha_2\beta_2$ complex remains locked in place as radical translocation and subsequent active site chemical steps transpire. This ability to lock the PCET pathway indicates that RNR capitalizes on the constraints imposed by PT distances in achieving acute control over long-range ET.

A number of studies indicate that the PCET pathway of RNR runs slightly thermodynamically uphill in the forward direction, 14,15,31,46,49 and active site chemistry is driven forward by the rapid and irreversible loss of water from the $2^\prime$-position of substrate. 24,57–59 This reaction landscape presents a mechanism by which RNR avoids the buildup of reactive amino acid radical intermediates over the course of its $\sim 70$ Å round-trip traverse between $\alpha$ and $\beta$. Our observation that HAT from C3 of substrate to C$_{4\alpha}$ is rate-limiting in forward PCET through $\alpha$ provides further evidence that an uphill PCET pathway generates the initial substrate radical.

### Conclusions

Jump-starting radical propagation with light has enabled the direct observation of PCET events previously inaccessible, revealing active site chemistry at the heart of RNR catalysis. Despite the fact that RNR turnover is rate-limited by conformational changes occurring at $\sim 2 \times 10^8$ s$^{-1}$, radical propagation steps are rapid. To unmask PCET events we have constructed a photochemically competent $\beta_2$ subunit capable of generating observable transient Y-species within the $\alpha_2\beta_2$ complex. With this construct, we have observed an IE on cleavage of the substrate $3^\prime$-C–H bond, revealing that this step is rate-limiting with respect to Y propagation through $\alpha$ and allowing us to report a lower bound for the rate constant associated with this step of $(1.4 \pm 0.4) \times 10^4$ s$^{-1}$. Unmasking PCET events in the active $\alpha_2\beta_2$ RNR has provided a first measure of active site kinetics in the class Ia enzyme, yielding new evidence for a long-standing model and shedding light on the mechanism by which RNR maintains control and specificity during long-range radical transport.

### Associated Content

**Supporting Information**

Experimental methods and instrumentation; calculation of photochemical Y yield; complete table of data including r and ΔOD amplitudes for two trials; pK$_a$ titration; HPLC analysis of radiolabeled photoproducts; single wavelength kinetics data, fitting, and residuals analysis; scheme depicting the entire model for RNR-mediated substrate turnover. This material is available free of charge via the Internet at http://pubs.acs.org.

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**Notes**
The authors declare no competing financial interest.