Chemical and Kinetic Evidence for an Essential Histidine in the Phosphotriesterase from *Pseudomonas diminuta*

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The pH rate profile for the hydrolysis of diethyl-p-nitrophenyl phosphate catalyzed by the phosphotriesterase from *Pseudomonas diminuta* shows a requirement for the deprotonation of an ionizable group for full catalytic activity. This functional group has an apparent pKₐ of 6.1 ± 0.1 at 25 °C, ΔH° of 7.9 kcal/mol, and ΔS° of −1.4 cal/K·mol. The enzyme is not inactivated in the presence of the chemical modification reagents diithiobiocis-(2-nitrobenzoate), methyl methane thiosulfonate, carbodiimide, pyridoxal, butanedione, or iodoacetic acid and thus cysteine, aspartate, glutamate, lysine, and arginine do not appear to be critical for catalytic activity. However, the phosphotriesterase is inactivated completely with methylene blue, Rose Bengal, or diethyl pyrocarbonate. The enzyme is not inactivated by diethyl pyrocarbonate in the presence of bound substrate analogs, and inactivation with diethyl pyrocarbonate is reversible upon addition of neutralized hydroxylamine. The modification of a single histidine residue by diethyl pyrocarbonate, as shown by spectrophotometric analysis, is responsible for the loss of catalytic activity. The pKₐ for diethyl pyrocarbonate modification is 6.1 ± 0.1 at 25 °C. These results have been interpreted to suggest that a histidine residue at the active site of phosphotriesterase is facilitating the reaction by general base catalysis.

The phosphotriesterase from *Pseudomonas diminuta* catalyzes the hydrolysis of several organophosphate triesters (Lewis et al., 1988; Donarski et al., 1989; Dumas et al., 1989) and phosphofluoridates (Dumas et al., 1990). The fastest substrate found to date is diethyl-p-nitrophenyl phosphate (paraoxon) with a kcat of 2100 s⁻¹ (Dumas et al., 1989) (Equation 1). The hydrolysis of these substrates has been shown to occur through the inversion of stereochemistry at the phosphorus center as a result of the direct attack of an activated water molecule (Lewis et al., 1988). The most likely mechanism to account for these observations is a general base mechanism in which there is the catalytic deprotonation of a water molecule by an active site base and the subsequent attack at the phosphorus center by the generated hydroxide.

There is a single zinc atom located at or near the active site of this phosphotriesterase (Dumas et al., 1989). The removal of the zinc by addition of chelating agents, such as o-phenanthroline, causes the complete inactivation of the enzyme, but the inactivation is prevented by the addition of high concentrations of paraaxon. Based upon pH-rate data, Donarski et al. (1989) reported that a single ionizable group with an apparent pKₐ of 6.1 ± 0.1 is required for the hydrolysis of paraaxon. This value is lower than the expected value of 8–10 for a zinc-bound water molecule (Cleland, 1977) and has thus encouraged the investigation of the active site residues of phosphotriesterase to identify the catalytic base and other important amino acids within the active site. The inactivation of acetylcholinesterase and many other serine proteases by phosphotriesters and phospho fluoridates such as diisopropyl fluorophosphate (DFP, I), 1 isopropyl methylphosphonofluoridate (sarin, II), and 1,2,2-trimethylpropyl methylphosphonofluoridate (soman, III) has been demonstrated to take place as a result of phosphorylation of a serine residue in the active site (Ohkawa, 1982). These compounds are all substrates for the phosphotriesterase from *P. diminuta* (Dumas et al., 1989). Therefore, the mechanism involved in the hydrolysis of these powerful (and often deadly) modification reagents deserves a rigorous investigation through the identification of the active site residues of the phosphotriesterase. The experiments presented in this study have provided evidence for the partici-

*This work was supported in part by grants from the Army Research Office (DAAL03-87-0017) and the Texas Advanced Technology Program. The costs of publication of this article were defrayed ethyl-3-(3-dimethylaminopropyl)carbodiimide; EPN, ethyl p-nitrophenyl phosphotriesterase is inactivated completely with methylene blue, Rose Bengal, or diethyl pyrocarbonate. The enzyme is not inactivated by diethyl pyrocarbonate in the presence of bound substrate analogs, and inactivation with diethyl pyrocarbonate is reversible upon addition of neutralized hydroxylamine. The modification of a single histidine residue by diethyl pyrocarbonate, as shown by spectrophotometric analysis, is responsible for the loss of catalytic activity. The pKₐ for diethyl pyrocarbonate modification is 6.1 ± 0.1 at 25 °C. These results have been interpreted to suggest that a histidine residue at the active site of phosphotriesterase is facilitating the reaction by general base catalysis.

1 The abbreviations used are: DFP, diisopropyl fluorophosphate; CAPS, 3-(cyclohexylamino)-1-propanesulfonate; CHES, 2-(cyclohexylamino)ethanesulfonate; DEF, diethyl pyrocarbonate; DMP, dimethylformamide; DTNB, dithiobis-(2-nitrobenzoate); EDC, 1-ethyl-3-(3-dimethylaminopropyl)carbodiimide; EPN, ethyl p-nitrophosphotriesterase from *Pseudomonas diminuta* shows a requirement for the deprotonation of an ionizable group for full catalytic activity. This functional group has an apparent pKₐ of 6.1 ± 0.1 at 25 °C, ΔH° of 7.9 kcal/mol, and ΔS° of −1.4 cal/K·mol. The enzyme is not inactivated in the presence of the chemical modification reagents diithiobiocis-(2-nitrobenzoate), methyl methane thiosulfonate, carbodiimide, pyridoxal, butanedione, or iodoacetic acid and thus cysteine, aspartate, glutamate, lysine, and arginine do not appear to be critical for catalytic activity. However, the phosphotriesterase is inactivated completely with methylene blue, Rose Bengal, or diethyl pyrocarbonate. The enzyme is not inactivated by diethyl pyrocarbonate in the presence of bound substrate analogs, and inactivation with diethyl pyrocarbonate is reversible upon addition of neutralized hydroxylamine. The modification of a single histidine residue by diethyl pyrocarbonate, as shown by spectrophotometric analysis, is responsible for the loss of catalytic activity. The pKₐ for diethyl pyrocarbonate modification is 6.1 ± 0.1 at 25 °C. These results have been interpreted to suggest that a histidine residue at the active site of phosphotriesterase is facilitating the reaction by general base catalysis.

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pH Rate Profiles—The kinetic parameters from paraoxon hydrolysis (V and V/Kc) were measured at different pH values by fitting the data to Equation 2.

\[
v = \frac{VA}{K_c + A}
\]  

(2)

The buffers used were 2-N-morpholinoethanesulfonic acid (MES, pH 5.3-6.5), piposphatetriesterase in 200 mM 2-N-cyclohexyl-2-propanesulfonic acid (CAPS, pH 9.0-9.9), and 3-(cyclohexylamino)-1-propanesulfonic acid (CAPS, pH 10.0). Below pH 6.0, the rates of enzymatic hydrolysis were measured by monitoring the change in absorbance at 320 nm. The extinction coefficients at 400 and 520 nm at several pH values over the range of interest were determined for p-nitrophenol using Beer’s Law. The exact extinction coefficient (e) at any pH was then determined graphically from a plot of (e / (1 + H/K)).

The kinetic values were determined by fitting the data to Equation 3:

\[
\log k = \log \left( \frac{c}{1 + H/K} \right)
\]

(3)

where k is either V or V/Kc, c is the pH-independent value of V or V/K, H is the hydrogen ion concentration, and K is the dissociation constant of the ionizable group. These experiments were repeated at 20, 25, 30, 35, and 40 °C. Extinction coefficients were determined for p-nitrophenol at each temperature as described above.

Survey of Chemical Modification Reagents—The inactivation of phosphotriesterase by chemical modification reagents was explored by the addition of a large excess of reagent to an enzyme solution, incubation at 25 °C, and determination of absorbance at 300 nm resulting from the release of p-nitrophenolic acid (c = 17,000 M⁻¹ cm⁻¹). Water-soluble carbodiimides have been shown to inactivate enzymes by reaction with amide (50 mM), carboxylate groups (Hoare and Koshland, 1966). A 4.0 mM solution of DEPC, pH 7.2, was used to investigate the modification of phosphotriesterase in 200 mM CHES, pH 9.0, buffer. The DEPC stock solutions (600 mM) were made fresh daily and stored at 4 °C. Additional details are given in the text.

Experimental Procedures

Materials—The phosphotriesterase from P. diminuta was purified to homogeneity from a baculovirus expression system as described previously (Dumas et al., 1989). The concentration of enzyme was calculated from the absorbance at 280 nm using an extinction coefficient of 1.86 ml/mg cm. All chemicals used in this study were purchased from either Aldrich or Sigma.

Enzyme Assays—The activity of phosphotriesterase was determined spectrophotometrically using a Gilford Model 2000 spectrophotometer in 2-N-cyclohexyl-2-propanesulfonic acid (CAPS, pH 9.0, buffer containing 1.0 mM diethyl-p-nitrophenyl phosphate (paraoxon) by monitoring the increase in absorbance at 400 nm resulting from the release of p-nitrophenol (c = 17,000 M⁻¹ cm⁻¹). One unit of enzymatic activity is defined as the amount of enzyme required to hydrolyze 1 μmol of paraoxon/min at 25 °C.

Kinetic data were analyzed with the aid of the computer programs of Cleland (1979).

Results

pH Rate Studies—The rate of paraoxon hydrolysis increases with pH to a limiting value at high pH, indicating the titration of a single base. The pH profiles gave apparent pK values that were the same values obtained for the log V profile within experimental error. The measurement of the enthalpy change (ΔH) and entropy (ΔS) of ionization for this single ionizable group was obtained by measuring the apparent pK values as a function of temperature (Equation 4).

\[
pK_c = \frac{\Delta H}{2.303RT} - \frac{\Delta S}{2.303R}
\]

(4)

In this equation, R is the ideal gas constant and T is the temperature in degrees Kelvin (Fig. 2). The enthalpy and entropy were determined to be 7.9 kcal/mol and −1.4 cal/K·mol, respectively.

Survey of Chemical Modification Reagents—The results of a survey of several chemical modification reagents for the inactivation of phosphotriesterase are summarized in Table I. No significant inactivation was observed with DTNB, MMTS, EDC, pyridoxal, butanedione, methyl p nitrophenyl isosulfonate, or iodoacetamide. Phosphotriesterase could be photoinactivated completely with 1.0 mM methylene blue (kobs = 0.7 ± 0.1 h⁻¹) or 600 μM Rose Bengal dye (kobs = 1.9 ± 0.1 h⁻¹). Phosphotriesterase is also inactivated with 6.0 mM DEPC. The DEPC-inactivated enzyme is reactivated almost completely upon addition of 1 M neutralized hydroxylamine, and there is complete protection from inactivation when phosphotriesterase is incubated with 6.0 mM DEPC in the presence of 2.0 mM diethyl-p-fluorophenyl phosphate (Fig. 3). The time-dependent loss in activity with DEPC, corrected for
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The hydrolysis of DEPC in buffer, can be described by Equation 5.

\[
\ln(A/A_0) = (-k/k')(1 - e^{-kt})
\]  

The amount of activity remaining at time \(t\) is represented by the ratio \(A/A_0\). \(k\) is the pseudo-first-order rate constant for inactivation of the enzyme, and \(k'\) is the pseudo-first order rate constant for the hydrolysis of DEPC in buffer (Gomi and Fujioka, 1983). The value of \(k'\) at 25 °C in 500 mM acetate or phosphate buffer ranges from 0.10 min⁻¹ at pH 7.4 to 0.07 min⁻¹ at pH 5.4. A plot of the pseudo-first-order rate constants for inactivation \(k\) versus the DEPC concentration is linear indicating that no reversible complex between enzyme and DEPC is formed (Church et al., 1985). The second-order rate constant for inactivation at pH 6.8 and 25 °C is 40 ± 5 M⁻¹ min⁻¹ (data not shown).

The 

The pH dependence for inactivation of phosphotriesterase with DEPC at 25 °C was studied over the pH range of 5.4 to 7.3. The pseudo-first-order rate constants for inactivation with 6.0 mM DEPC were fit to Equation 3 to calculate the pKₐ of the modified residue. The pKₐ of the titratable group is 6.1 ± 0.1 (Fig. 4).

The difference spectrum between 12.4 μM native enzyme and 12.4 μM enzyme 30 min after addition of DEPC (20% remaining activity) shows a large absorption peak at 245 nm (data not shown), indicating the modification of histidine residues (Miles, 1977). No absorbance decrease is observed around 278 nm. The number of histidine residues modified under these conditions, based upon the maximal absorbance of the difference spectrum, is calculated as 2.0 using an extinction coefficient of 3200 M⁻¹ cm⁻¹ (Miles, 1977). When the inactivation is investigated in the presence of 2.0 mM diethyl-p-nitrophenyl phosphate at 25 °C with 12 mM DEPC, only 2.1 residues per enzyme are modified after 30 min.

**DISCUSSION**

The identity of the functional amino acids within the active site of the phosphotriesterase from *P. diminuta* has been examined with a combination of kinetic and chemical probes. No significant loss in catalytic activity of the enzyme was observed when the phosphotriesterase was incubated with dithiobis-(2-nitrobenzoic acid), methyl methane thiosulfonate, 1-ethyl-3-(3-dimethylaminopropyl)carbodiimide, pyridoxal, butanedione, or iodoacetamide. These results suggest that the side chains of cysteine (Kenyon and Bruice, 1977), aspartate (Hoare and Koshland, 1966), glutamate (Hoare and Koshland, 1966), lysine (Egorov et al., 1982), and arginine (Riordan, 1973) are not required for catalytic activity or that some or all of these groups are totally inaccessible to the modification reagents. Since this phosphotriesterase has been shown to catalyze the hydrolysis of ethyl-p-nitrophenylthiophosphonate (EPN) (Lewis et al., 1988), di-n-butyl-p-nitro-

**Figure 3. The inactivation of phosphotriesterase with DEPC as a function of time.** The inactivation of phosphotriesterase with 6.0 mM DEPC (circles) is reversed upon addition of 1.0 M neutralized hydroxylamine (arrow). There is complete protection against inactivation by 6.0 mM DEPC when the inactivation mixture contains 2.0 mM diethyl-p-fluorophenyl phosphate (triangles). Additional details are given in the text.

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**Table I**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Targeted residue</th>
<th>Reagent</th>
<th>Conditions</th>
<th>Inactivation rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cysteine</td>
<td>50 μM DBTNB</td>
<td>pH 9.0⁰</td>
<td>&lt;0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cysteine</td>
<td>20 mM MMTS</td>
<td>pH 9.0⁰</td>
<td>&lt;0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspartate or glutamate</td>
<td>4 mM EDC</td>
<td>pH 9.0 and 7.0</td>
<td>&lt;0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspartate or glutamate</td>
<td>4 mM EDC</td>
<td>pH 9.0 and 7.0 with 40 mM glycine methyl ester</td>
<td>&lt;0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lysine</td>
<td>100 mM pyridoxal</td>
<td>pH 9.0⁰</td>
<td>&lt;0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arginine</td>
<td>100 mM butanedione</td>
<td>pH 9.0⁰</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Histidine</td>
<td>1 mM methylene blue</td>
<td>pH 6.5⁰</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Histidine</td>
<td>0.6 mM Rose Bengal</td>
<td>pH 6.5⁰</td>
<td>1.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Histidine</td>
<td>6 mM DEPC</td>
<td>pH 6.5⁰</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Histidine</td>
<td>5 mM methyl-p-nitrophenylsulfonate</td>
<td>pH 6.0⁰</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Histidine or cysteine</td>
<td>50 mM iodoacetamide</td>
<td>pH 9.0⁰</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*100 mM CHES buffer.
*100 mM borate buffer.
*Photoinactivation as described in the text, 100 mM HEPES buffer.
*500 mM phosphate buffer.
*100 mM MES in 5% methanol.
Histidines present in phosphotriesterase after 80% of the original catalytic activity is lost. The paraoxon analog, di-
}

diphosphate, and other phosphate triesters with rather large side chains (Donarski et al., 1989) and can also accumu-
late the pesticide coumaphos (Dumas et al., 1989) with a large coumarin leaving group then it would appear reasonable that only the largest modification reagents would be excluded physically from the active site.

The inactivation of phosphotriesterase by chemical modification has only been achieved by reaction with the histidine reagents methylene blue, Rose Bengal, and diethyl pyrocate-
bone. The photo-oxidation of proteins with methylene blue or Rose Bengal dye has been shown in some proteins to result in the modification of methionine and tryptophan residues and sometimes tyrosine, serine, or threonine in addition to the most commonly modified histidine groups (Ray and Koshland, 1961). Whereas incubation with either of these dyes with light led to the complete inactivation of phosphotriest-
erase, the broad reactivity of these reagents weakens the value of these experiments toward the identification of an essential active site histidine. A more selective modification of histidyl residues has been made possible with the development of DEPC (Miles, 1977). DEPC inactivates phosphotriesterase with a second-order rate constant of 40 M−1min−1. This inactiva-
tion reaction requires the use of a large molar excess of reagent (approximately 1000 times) to counter the relatively rapid hydrolysis of DEPC in aqueous buffer. In spite of this large excess of reagent, very little disubstitution of the modified imidazole occurs because the inactivation is reversed almost completely upon addition of neutralized hydroxylamine (87% recovered). A dicarboxyethylated imidazole would not be reactivated with hydroxylamine, because ring opening would be expected to occur (Miles, 1977). Modification of lysyl groups by DEPC is unaltered with hydroxylamine (Melchoir and Fahrney, 1970), therefore lysine can be ruled out as the critical residue because any inactivation at a lysine would not have been rapidly reversed with hydroxylamine. Modification at tyrosine is, however, reversible with hydroxylamine. A reaction of a tyrosyl group can be identified by a character-
istic decrease in absorbance at 275-280 nm after reaction with DEPC (Burnstein et al., 1974). There is no decrease in absorbance observed in the difference spectrum for phospho-
triesterase in this wavelength range. There is, however, a large increase in absorbance at 245 nm as would be expected with the modification of histidine residues. This observed increase corresponds to the modification of 2.9 residues of the 7 total histidines present in phosphotriesterase after 80% of the original catalytic activity is lost. The paraoxon analog, di-
ethyl-p-fluorophenyl phosphate, has been shown to be a competitive inhibitor versus paraoxon (Ki = 0.02 mM), but this compound is not hydrolyzed at a significant rate (Donarski et al., 1989). When phosphotriesterase is incubated with an amount 20 times greater than the Ki of diethyl-p-fluorophenyl phosphate, essentially all of the enzyme exists in the enzyme-inhibitor complex. The active site of the enzyme would therefore be protected by the inhibitor. When incubated with DEPC in the presence of diethyl-p-fluorophenyl phosphate, only 2.1 histidine residues are modified, and the enzyme is fully active. The difference between the inhibitor-protected enzyme and the inactivated enzyme of 0.8 histidines corre-
ponds exactly to the percent activity lost. Presumably, the remaining histidines are less reactive toward DEPC and are therefore not modified under these conditions.

The pKs for the imidazole moiety of the single histidine modified with DEPC was determined by measuring the rate of inactivation as a function of pH. Only an unprotonated imidazole can act as a nucleophile and thus the reaction of the phosphotriesterase DEPC is pH-dependent. The pKs for the imidazole that appears critical for enzyme activity is 6.1 at 25 °C.

The inactivation studies of the phosphotriesterase with a variety of modification reagents were augmented with an analysis of the change in the kinetic parameters V and V/K with pH. For both V and V/K there is observed the titration of a single ionizable group with a pKa of 6.1 at 25 °C that must be unprotonated for catalytic activity. Because the sub-
strate paraoxon has no ionizable groups in the pH range 5–
10, this group must be of enzyme origin.

This pKa value of 6.1 is within the range typically reported for histidine residues, but could possibly represent a carbox-
ylate or a zinc-bound water (Auld et al., 1986). The enthalpy (∆H) of ionization (7.9 kcal/mol) falls within the range of values expected for histidine, cysteine, tyrosine residues, or zinc-bound water but is much lower than the value expected for a lysyl or arginyl residue (about 10–12 kcal/mol) and much higher than the value expected for carboxylate groups (0.1 kcal/mol). Only histidyl and lysyl residues have been reported to have entropies as low as −1.4 cal/K mol (Auld et al., 1986). Consideration of the enthalpy and entropy together are consistent only with the titration of a histidine (Fig. 5).

In summary, the apparent pKa of 6.1 and the related ther-
udodynamic components ∆H순 (7.9 kcal/mol) and ∆S 순 (−1.4 cal/K mol) determined from pH rate profiles and rates of inactivation with DEPC are most consistent with the ioniza-
tion of a critical histidine residue. Upon addition of histidine modification reagents, phosphotriesterase is inactivated completely, and incubation of phosphotriesterase with other res-
idue-specific reagents causes no loss in enzymatic activity. These results are evidence for an essential histidine in the

![Fig. 4](http://www.jbc.org/)

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**Fig. 4.** The pH versus inactivation rate from DEPC mod-
ification of phosphotriesterase. The solid line is drawn from a fit of the data to Equation 3 for a pKa of 6.1 ± 0.1. The values for log k are taken as the pseudo-first order rate constant for inactivation of phosphotriesterase by DEPC. Additional details are given in the text.

**Fig. 5.** Comparison of thermodynamic parameters for phos-
photriesterase to literature values. The ∆H 순 and ∆S 순 values for phosphotriesterase (filled circle) are consistent with the ionization of a histidine. Adapted from Auld et al. (1986).
active site of phosphotriesterase. The function of this histidine in the catalysis may be defined better in the course of studies of the active site zinc.

There are at least two catalytic roles a zinc ion may play in a metalloenzyme. First, the substrate may displace a water ligand and bind directly to the zinc. The zinc, as a Lewis acid, polarizes the substrate making it more susceptible for nucleophilic attack. The second possible role would be for a zinc-bound hydroxide as the actual nucleophile for the hydrolysis of a substrate. Both of these mechanisms have been proposed for many zinc metalloenzymes, including carbamoyl anhydrase (Lindskog, 1983), carboxypeptidase A (Vallee et al., 1983), and thermolysin (Holmes and Matthews, 1981). Similarly, the zinc ion may function in either of these capacities in phosphotriesterase.

Pocker and Strom (1968) proposed a histidine as the catalytic group in carbonic anhydrase based upon thermodynamic data. However, the 1H-NMR spectroscopy studies by Campbell et al. (1974) have shown that none of the histidines titrate near the apparent pKa of the catalytic group. Unlike phosphotriesterase, the chemical modification of histidine residues in carbonic anhydrase results in only a partial inactivation of the enzyme. The crystal structure of the complex of carbonic anhydrase with imidazole (a competitive inhibitor versus CO2) has been solved by Kannon et al. (1975). This inhibitor is located near the zinc ion without displacing the metal-bound water. This result suggests the zinc may act as a Lewis acid in addition to providing the site for the nucleophilic hydroxide.

The chemical modification of carboxypeptidase A with carboxylate-modifying reagents results in the complete inactivation of the enzyme, but the pK inact for carboxypeptidase with Woodward's reagent K is 7.0, a value greater than the apparent pK of 6.0 determined from pH rate data (Petta, 1971). The apparent pK is also perturbed significantly in metal replacement studies (Auld and Vallee, 1970). The modified Gln-270 of carboxypeptidase A is within hydrogen bond distance to the zinc-bound water (Bauer et al., 1979) and the pK at 6.0, therefore, could be regarded as a cooperative ionization of these two groups (Bauer et al., 1983). The enthalpy of ionization for the catalytic group in carboxypeptidase A has been shown to be 7.2 ± 0.1 kcal/K·mol (Makinen et al., 1979). This value compares favorably to the observed ΔH inact for a water on model pentacoordinate zinc ions (Woolley, 1975). Solvent perturbation studies for carboxypeptidase A have indicated a cationic acid (Vallee et al., 1985). The similarities between carboxypeptidase A and phosphotriesterase include thermodynamic evidence and parity in chemical modification studies.

Thermolysin has been shown to be completely inactivated by the modification of Gln-143 (Holmes et al., 1983) or by modification of histidine residues (Pangburn and Walsh, 1975), and the bell-shaped pH rate profile is consistent with the ionization of either a carboxylate or zinc-bound water and the deprotonation of a histidine (Stauffer, 1971). Furthermore, the X-ray crystal structure for a thermolysin-phosphonamidate complex has shown the phosphonamidate inhibitor to be ligated to the zinc (Christianson and Lipscomb, 1980). Therefore the role of zinc in thermolysin appears to be in the polarization of the carbonyl group. As shown in the comparison between phosphotriesterase and carboxypeptidase A described above, the results of thermodynamic and chemical modification studies for thermolysin and phosphotriesterase are analogous. The hydrolysis of organophosphates by phosphotriesterase most likely occurs by the deprotonation of a water molecule by histidine followed by attack of the hydroxyl on the phosphorus center that has been polarized by binding to the zinc ion (Fig. 6).

Despite many years of study, the molecular mechanisms of carbonic anhydrase, carboxypeptidase A, and thermolysin are still under investigation. The zinc ion has been implicated as a Lewis acid and as a general base (as zinc-bound water) for each of these enzymes. Like these enzymes, phosphotriesterase is a zinc metalloenzyme for which either mechanism may be proposed. The distinction between these mechanisms for phosphotriesterase may become more clear with the measurement of primary and secondary oxygen isotope effects and metal replacement experiments which are currently in progress.

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