

Unfolding and Folding Proteins

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The atomic force microscope (AFM) is being utilized in even more clever ways to reveal details of molecular structure and function. As an example, Julio Fernandez and Hongbin Li have used the AFM in the force-clamp mode to monitor the folding trajectory of a single protein.² They have demonstrated in a unique way in which a single protein behaves when put under tension, and then what happens when the tension is relieved.

Fernandez and Li linked several molecules of ubiquitin, a small protein, together to form a polyubiquitin chain. With one end of the chain attached to a substrate, the tip of a soft cantilever of the AFM attached to a single protein, and from one to nine ubiquitin molecules were picked up. Using an improved piezoelectric actuator, a force of 120 piconewtons (pN) could be suddenly applied as tension on the chain. A stepwise increase in the length of the chain could be measured, each step corresponding to the unfolding of a single ubiquitin molecule.

Then it got interesting. The tension on the chain was suddenly decreased to 15 pN. There was an immediate shortening of the chain, corresponding to the elastic recoil of the unfolded chain. This was followed by a complex series of about three more stages. Interestingly, in the 81 events that were analyzed, the patterns of these latter stages were similar, but never identical. This suggests that there are multiple folding pathways for this protein, that is,

it doesn't always fold the same way twice. When the restored to 120 pN, stepwise unfolding was observed



When the polyubiquitin chain was fully unfolded, each residue of each molecule was exposed to the saline solution in which the experiment was conducted. Under these conditions, the unfolded chain can be considered to be a polymer coil in a poor solvent. It is well known that under these conditions the chain tends to collapse in a 'coil-globule' phase transition. This is similar, but not identical, to the folding trajectories observed in this study, suggesting that protein folding differs from polymer collapse. Fernandez and Li interpreted their findings, as more likely, a more complex phenomenon in which the collapsing chain rapidly forms bonds that limit the degrees of freedom of the collapsing chain, guiding the trajectory to the native state of the proteins. In other words, the folding of ubiquitin did not consist of transitions between discrete states, but rather occurred through a series of continuous changes, finally resulting in a configuration with the lowest energy.

The direct observation of the folding trajectory of a small protein, as demonstrated by Fernandez and Li, opens the way for detailed studies of protein-folding pathways. By studying these trajectories under different physical-chemical conditions, and using genetically engineered proteins, we may begin to identify specific physical phenomena underlying protein folding! ■

Footnotes:

¹ The author gratefully acknowledges Dr. Julio Fernandez for reviewing this article.

² Fernandez, J.M., and H. Li, Force-clamp spectroscopy monitors the folding trajectory of a single protein, *Science* 303:1647-1678, 2004.

INDEX OF ARTICLES

Unfolding and Folding Proteins.....	3
<i>Stephen W. Carmichael, Mayo Clinic</i>	
Spiral Powder Overlays	8
<i>P. Fraundorf and Shuhan Lin, UM-StL Dept. of Physics & Astronomy, and Center for Molecular Electronics, St. Louis MO</i>	
TEM Morphometry Reveals Membrane Deficits in Parietal Cells Lacking Specific Ion Transporters	12
<i>Miller ML, Gawenis LR, Andringa A, Shull GE, University of Cincinnati, College of Medicine</i>	
Color Matching to Ink Jet Printers from a Computer Screen, Part 2.	18
<i>Jerry Sedgewick, University of Minnesota</i>	
Electron Tomography in the Study of Bacterial Structure and Function	22
<i>Kenneth H. Downing,* Haixin Sui,* Luis R. Comolli* and Hoi-Ying Holman;** * Life Science Division, ** Earth Sciences Division, Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory</i>	
Having Your Cake and Eating It Too: A Procedure for Obtaining Plan View and Cross Section TEM Images from the Same Site	26
<i>R.B. Irwin, A. Anciso, P.J. Jones, and C. Patton, Texas Instruments, Inc.</i>	
Confocal Scanning Laser Holography: A Tool for Non-Invasive Internal Measurement	30
<i>RA McLeod, P Jacquemin, S Lai, RA Herring, University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada</i>	

Dehydration and Rehydration Issues in Biological Tissue Processing for Electron Microscopy	32
<i>Christian T. K.-H. Stadtländer, University of St. Thomas, Minnesota</i>	
Microscopy Today 2004 Salary Survey Results	36
<i>Ron Anderson and Barbara Foster,* Microscopy Today and *Microscopy/Microscopy & Education, Inc.</i>	
Funding Opportunities for Acquiring Major Equipment from Federal Granting Agencies M&M 2004 Core Facility Management – Part I: NIH	42
<i>Organizer: Debby Sherman, Purdue University</i>	
Specimen Capsules For Critical-Point Drying	46
<i>Sol Seppenwol, University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point</i>	
Industry News	48
NetNotes.....	50

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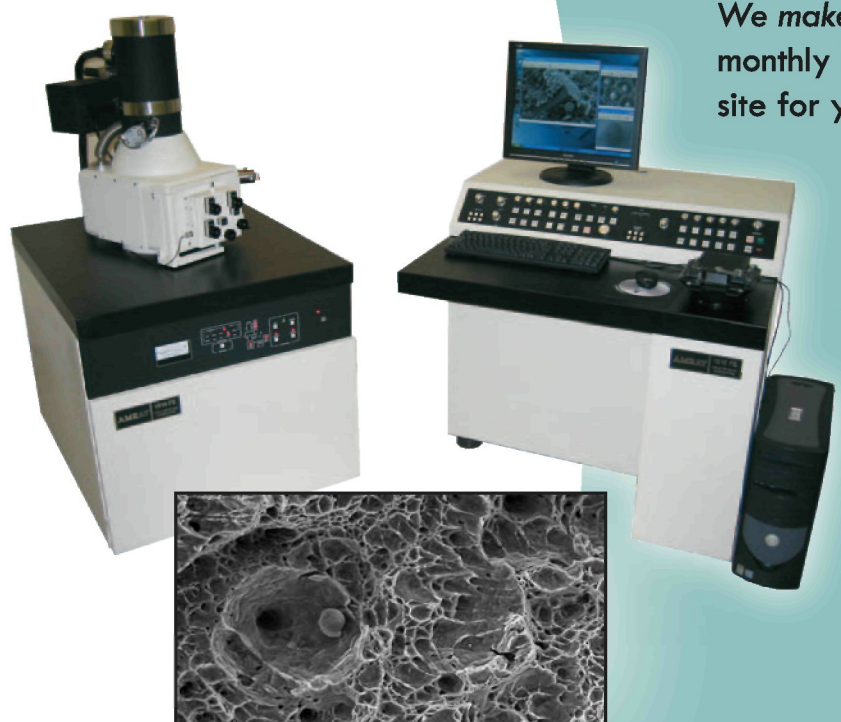
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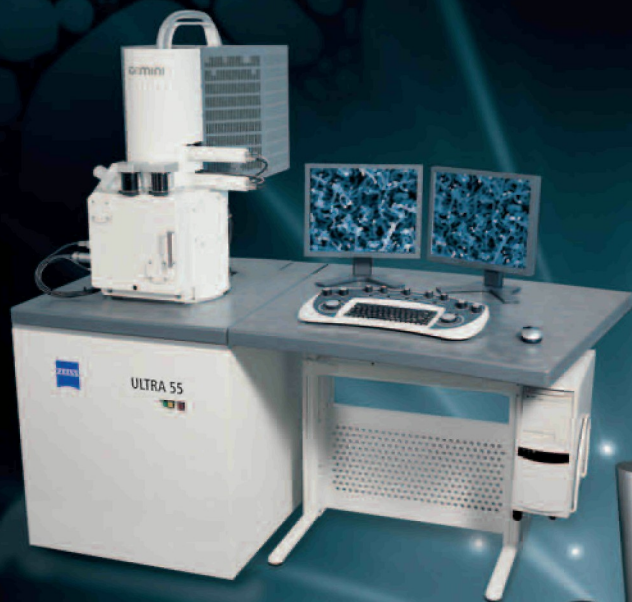
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