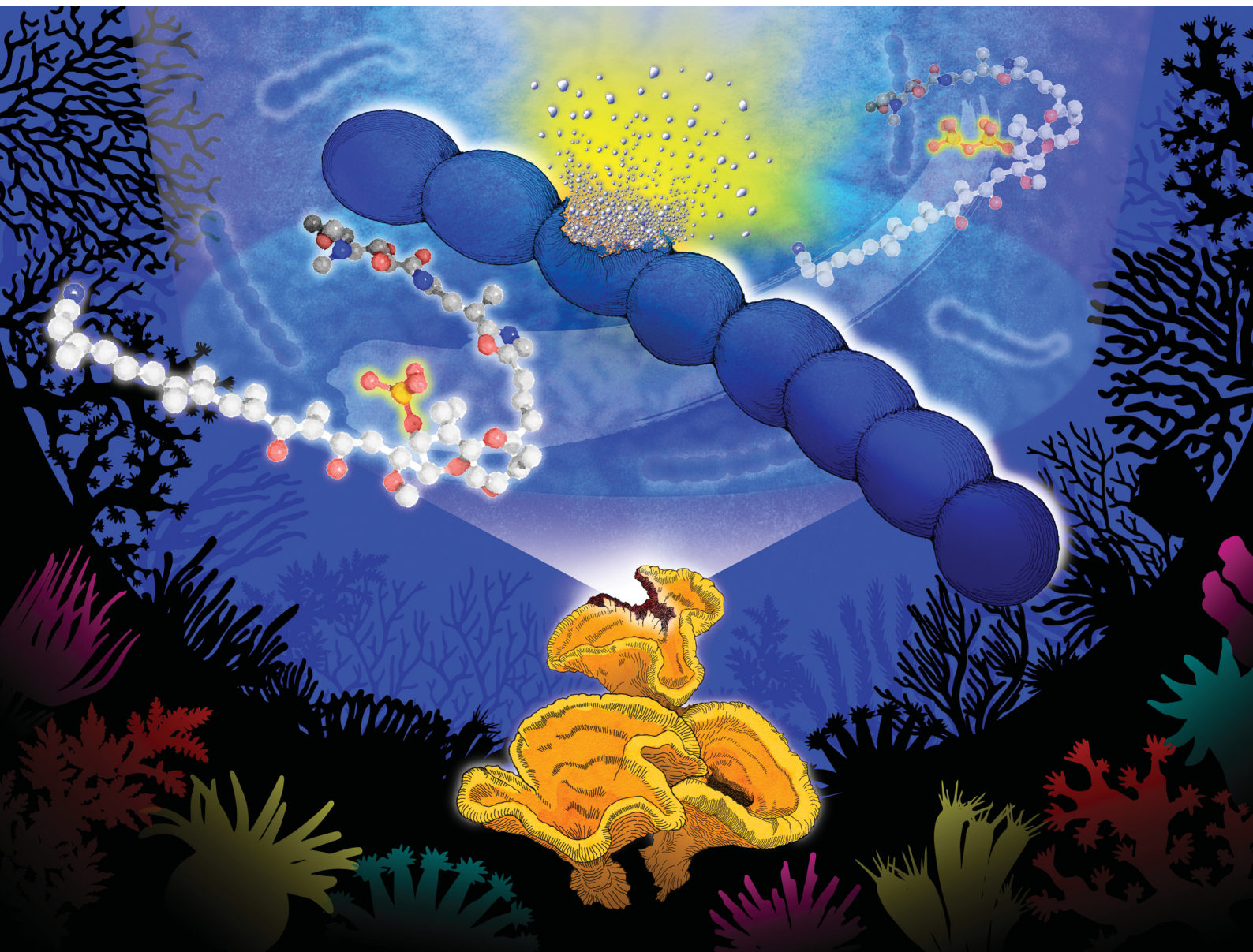


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Insights into phosphatase-activated chemical defense in a marine sponge holobiont†

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Marine sponges often contain potent cytotoxic compounds, which in turn evokes the principle question of how marine sponges avoid self-toxicity. In a marine sponge *Discodermia calyx*, the highly toxic calyculin A is detoxified by the phosphorylation, which is catalyzed by the phosphotransferase CalQ of a producer symbiont, “*Candidatus Entotheonella*” sp. Here we show the activating mechanism to dephosphorylate the stored phosphocalyculin A protoxin. The phosphatase specific to phosphocalyculin A is CalL, which is also encoded in the calyculin biosynthetic gene cluster. CalL represents a new clade and unprecedentedly coordinates the heteronuclear metals Cu and Zn. CalL is localized in the periplasmic space of the sponge symbiont, where it is ready for the on-demand production of calyculin A in response to sponge tissue disruption.

Introduction

Marine sponges often contain highly potent cytotoxic compounds, and some play a role in chemical defense.^{1–3} However, these cytotoxic compounds usually target molecules or signaling pathways that are common and essential to all eukaryotic organisms, including the sponges themselves.^{4,5} This fact evokes the principle question of how the marine sponges avoid self-toxicity caused by the accumulated cytotoxins.⁶

We previously reported the biosynthetic gene cluster (BGC) of calyculin A, which is the major cytotoxin originally isolated from a Japanese marine sponge, *Discodermia calyx* (Fig. 1).^{7,8} Its potent cytotoxicity is attributable to the specific inhibitory activity against protein phosphatases 1 and 2A.^{9–11} The structure features a variety of functionalities, including tetraene, oxazole, phosphate and dimethylamino groups. The main framework of this molecule is biosynthesized by a hybrid pathway of polyketide synthase (PKS) and non-ribosomal peptide synthetase (NRPS), followed by post-assembly line

modifications such as nitrile formation.⁸ The detailed mechanisms of the tailoring reactions at the later stage of calyculin biosynthesis have remained largely unknown, but we previously reported that a phosphotransferase, CalQ (Fig. 1), is involved in the phosphorylation process unique to the calyculin pathway.⁸ Notably, CalQ, encoded in the calyculin BGC, appends an additional phosphate group on the intrinsic phosphate group of calyculin A to generate phosphocalyculin A, a previously unknown derivative. Since the phosphate group in calyculin A is essential to exert the specific inhibition of protein phosphatases 1 and 2A, the cytotoxicity of phosphocalyculin A is significantly diminished by this post-assembly line modification.^{8–11} This bioconversion process offers a clue for the elucidation of the resistance mechanism of the host sponge, conferred by the symbiotic bacterium “*Candidatus Entotheonella*” sp. producing calyculin A.⁸

Thus, phosphocalyculin A was first discovered as the product of the CalQ-catalyzed reaction. This is because the homogenization of the wet sponge, even with organic solvents, stimulates the rapid conversion of phosphocalyculin A to calyculin A, which resulted in the disappearance of the phosphocalyculin A in the extract.⁸ To circumvent this conversion process, the fresh sponge was flash-frozen in liquid nitrogen, and then the frozen sponge was freeze-dried to remove water. The methanol extract of the freeze-dried sponge contained phosphocalyculin A as the dominant metabolite, in place of calyculin A.⁸ Furthermore, the crude enzyme fraction of the sponge *D. calyx* efficiently dephosphorylated phosphocalyculin A to generate calyculin A in a few minutes, while the heat-denatured fraction had diminished activity. Thus, this highly efficient bioconversion process is obviously catalyzed by an

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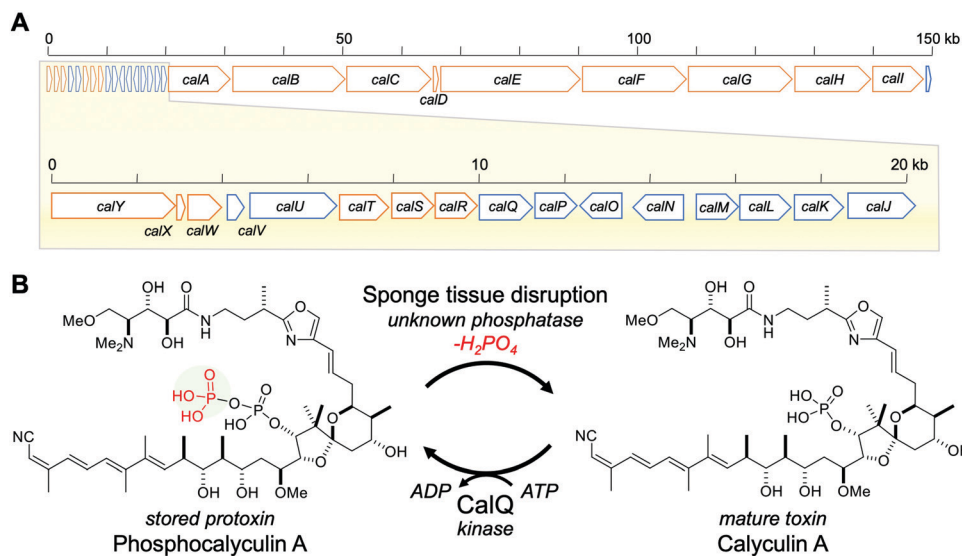


Fig. 1 Calyculin A biosynthetic gene cluster and bioconversion process between calyculin A and phosphocalyculin A. (A) Calyculin biosynthetic gene cluster. The ORFs encoding the NRPS and PKS responsible for the assembly line of calyculin biosynthesis are highlighted in orange. The other ORFs in blue are putative tailoring enzymes except for CalQ, which has been identified as the calyculin A-specific phosphotransferase. The putative functions of *calJ*–*calY* genes are listed in Table S1, ESI.† (B) The activation/inactivation mechanism of phosphocalyculin A/calyculin A through dephosphorylation/phosphorylation in the marine sponge *D. calyx*.

unidentified enzyme in the sponge-microbe association (Fig. 1B).⁸

This bioconversion proceeds through the wound-activated mechanism of the toxic secondary metabolite, as often found in higher plants and exemplified by the cyanogen glycosides, which are defense chemicals that generate hydrogen cyanide.¹² The wound-activated chemical defense system prevails not only in terrestrial higher plants, but also in mushrooms, marine algae, and a few marine sponges.^{12–21} To achieve both self-resistance and chemical defense, this process requires a suite of activating and deactivating enzymes. In the case of the phosphatase inhibitor, calyculin A, the deactivation and activation are accomplished by adding and removing a phosphate group on calyculin A itself. However, the activating enzyme catalyzing the dephosphorylation of phosphocalyculin A has not been identified yet. In particular, the origin of the phosphatase is interesting to illuminate how calyculin biogenesis is triggered for the purpose of chemically defending the sponge holobiont. In this study, we purified phosphocalyculin A phosphatase from the sponge, and confirmed that the phosphatase is encoded in the calyculin BGC and therefore produced by the bacterial symbiont *Entotheonella*.

Results and discussion

Isolation of phosphocalyculin A phosphatase from the sponge *D. calyx*

We first attempted to isolate a native phosphatase specific to phosphocalyculin A from the sponge holobiont, since the origins of the phosphatase in the sponge-microbe association remain enigmatic. The crude enzyme solution of the *D. calyx*

sponge showed an intense phosphatase activity against phosphocalyculin A, which could be reproducibly detected by the malachite green assay even after one month of storage at 4 °C. To distinguish between the phosphocalyculin-specific phosphatase and protein phosphatases, we utilized the malachite green assay in conjunction with the conventional phosphatase assay with the chromogenic substrate *p*-nitrophenyl phosphate (*p*NPP), which excludes the fraction containing protein phosphatases derived from the marine sponge.

The sponge (1.8 kg wet weight) was extracted with buffer, and the extract was desalted by ultrafiltration. We performed several preliminary fractionation methods, such as ammonium sulfate fractionation, and precipitation by using organic solvents, but all attempts were inefficient, and the activity was distributed broadly in the fractions. Therefore, the desalted extract was directly fractionated by anion exchange column chromatography. The phosphatase activity specific to phosphocalyculin A was detected in the flow-through fraction, which was then further fractionated on a cation exchange column. Fortunately, the phosphatase was retained in the column and eluted with 250 mM NaCl, and exhibited phosphatase activity against phosphocalyculin A, but not *p*NPP. The results indicated that the phosphocalyculin-specific phosphatase is a basic protein and the concomitant acidic proteins could be efficiently removed at the early fractionation stage by an anion exchange column. Encouraged by these results, the active fraction was fractionated on a Phenyl-Sepharose column, followed by gel filtration with Sephacryl S200, which resulted in a 660-fold purification of the phosphatase as compared to the origin of cell free extract. Finally, after separation on a MonoS column, the active fraction was further purified by HPLC with a gel filtration column (Shodex PROTEIN LW-803) to afford the native phosphocalyculin



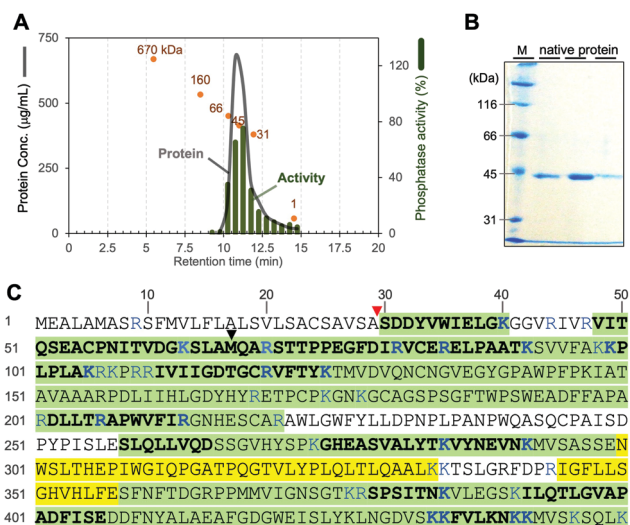


Fig. 2 Identification of the native phosphocalcylin A phosphatase. (A) Chromatogram of LW-803 gel filtration. The elution time of the native phosphatase was 10.7 min, suggesting that the molecular weight is 45 ± 3 kDa (orange spots indicate the profile of each calibration marker: 670–1 kDa). (B) 10% SDS-PAGE of the purified native protein (CBB stained). Lane M is molecular weight markers. The three lanes represent fractions eluted between 10.5–12.0 min. The protein bands were subjected to the PMF analysis (see Fig. S2, ESI[†]). (C) Amino acid sequences of native phosphatase and recombinant CaL detected by PMF. The peptide fragments detected from both the recombinant and native CaL proteins, highlighted in green. The fragments only detected with recombinant CaL are highlighted in yellow. Plain regions were not detected from both proteins. The fragments detected by LC-MS/MS are shown as bold letters. The MS/MS fragmentation patterns of the digested amino acids of both native and recombinant CaL are compared in Fig. S2 (ESI[†]). The signal peptidase I cleavage site and the start methionine in the previously predicted ORF are pointed out with red and black triangles, respectively.

phosphatase, which was the major spot detected by 2D gel electrophoresis (Fig. S1, ESI[†]). The 2D gel electrophoresis profile indicated that the isoelectric point (pI) of the native phosphatase is *ca.* 8.3–9.5 and the molecular weight is *ca.* 45 kDa, which is consistent with the elution profile of the active fraction in the gel filtration chromatography (Fig. 2A).

CaL, the native phosphatase specific to phosphocalcylin A

Based on the physico-chemical properties of the native phosphatase, we reinvestigated the modification enzymes encoded in the calyculin BGC originating from *Ca. Entothoonella* sp. There is one open reading frame (ORF) (CaL, 43 kDa, Protein ID: BAP05586.1) annotated as a calcineurin-like metallophosphoesterase encoded in the upstream region, along with three phosphotransferases including CalQ (Fig. 1A). To our surprise, the isoelectric points of all of the other proteins were acidic or neutral, except for CaL (pI = 9.01, Table S1, ESI[†]). To determine whether the phosphocalcylin-specific phosphatase is identical to CaL, the band detected in the SDS-PAGE (Fig. 2B) of the native phosphatase fraction was excised, digested with trypsin and subjected to peptide mass fingerprinting (PMF) by liquid chromatography–electrospray ionization–tandem mass spectrometry (LC–ESI–MS/MS). As expected, the peptide fragments with

amino acid sequences corresponding to CaL were successfully detected from the band of the native phosphatase (Fig. 2C), and this identification was further corroborated by the peptide fragments detected from the recombinant CaL. However, the PMF unexpectedly suggested that the native CaL contains an additional N-terminal region (Fig. S2C, ESI[†]), which was inconsistent with the ORF predicted from the originally reported DNA sequence.⁸ This observation prompted us to resequence the upstream region of *call*, and we discovered that the adenine encoded at 15 214–base pair (bp) was incorrectly duplicated (Fig. S3, ESI[†]). The revised sequence allowed us to find a new start codon within a more upstream region than the previous sequence (Fig. 2C and Fig. S4, ESI[†]). To further confirm the N-terminus of the native form of CaL, we carefully inspected the PMF data of the native phosphatase, by using reference sequences cleaved at every single amino acid from the theoretical N-terminus of the new ORF. As a result, no peptide fragment from the theoretical N-terminus to A29 was detected, but among the detected fragments, we found an N-terminally truncated peptide fragment ('30-SDDYVWIELGK-40', Fig. 2C and Fig. S2A, ESI[†]) that corresponded to the distal end. The detected fragment at the C-terminal end of the native phosphatase was identical to the ORF of CaL (45 kDa) (Fig. 2C and Fig. S2, ESI[†]). Therefore, we reasoned that the N-terminally truncated CaL, encoded upstream of the calyculin assembly-line (Fig. 1A), is identical to the native phosphatase specific to phosphocalcylin A.

Functional analysis of recombinant CaL

CaL is composed of an N-terminal signal peptide sequence fused with a catalytic domain belonging to the metallophosphoesterase (MPE) superfamily.²² According to signal sequence prediction,²³ the N-terminal signal peptide is likely to be involved in the protein localization, in good agreement with the N-terminal truncation to generate the peptide fragment '30-SDDYVWIELGK-40', detected in the PMF data. To confirm this finding, we implemented a functional analysis of recombinant CaL. Due to the possible cleavage of the N-terminal signal peptide by the signal peptidases of the heterologous host, the C-terminal *Strep* tag II-fused CaL (CaL-*strep*) was heterologously expressed in *Escherichia coli* BL21(DE3). The fraction containing CaL-*strep* was purified with *Strep*-Tactin[®] agarose, followed by PROTEIN LW-803 column chromatography (Fig. S5, ESI[†]). The purified CaL-*strep* not only showed phosphatase activity against phosphocalcylin A (Fig. S6A, ESI[†]), but also migrated as a major spot on the 2D gel electrophoresis, which was superimposable onto that of the native CaL (Fig. S1, ESI[†]). Furthermore, to identify the signal peptidase cleavage site, the purified CaL-*strep* was subjected to PMF in the same manner as the native CaL. As expected, the 30–40 peptide fragment was detected from the recombinant CaL as well as the native CaL (Fig. 2C, 30'-SDDYVWIELGK-40', in comparison with the MS/MS spectra of native CaL in Fig. S2A, ESI[†]). A VXA motif at residues 27–29, which is well-known as the signal peptidase I (SPase I) recognition site, is



heteronuclear metals Cu and Zn at the active site, which is unprecedented among the MPE superfamily members.

Localization of recombinant CalL and its reaction place in the producer

Considering the wound-activated mechanism of this bioconversion, we reasoned that the specific localization of CalL would be crucial for the compartmentalization of the bioconversion process. To obtain clues toward the localization of CalL, the amino acid sequences of CalL were analyzed with the well-established localization predictor of bacterial proteins, InterPro.²³ The prediction tool showed that the signal peptide sequence at the N-terminus of CalL would be recognized by the SecYEG translocase, which would drag it into the periplasm.^{32–34} To evaluate this hypothesis, the subcellular localization of recombinant CalL-*strep* in *E. coli* BL21(DE3) was investigated. In order to purify CalL-*strep* from whole cell protein extracts, a two-step purification was generally required to remove the chaperones (GroES, 60 kDa; and DnaK, 70 kDa; Fig. S10, ESI[†]) derived from the heterologous expression host. However, CalL-*strep* was purified efficiently from the periplasmic fraction, without any endogenous chaperone contamination, by using only the *strep*-affinity column (Fig. S10, ESI[†]), indicating that CalL accumulates in the periplasmic space. After translocation by the SecYEG complex, the N-terminus of the CalL preprotein would be recognized by SPase I and cleaved between residues 29 and 30, and then successively released into the periplasmic space of the heterologous expression host *E. coli*.

On the other hand, CalQ is expected to be cytosolic according to the localization predictors,²³ which led us to hypothesize that both phosphocalcylin A and CalQ are localized in the cytoplasm of the producer cells. To confirm the place where the dephosphorylation reaction occurs, the sponge homogenate was subjected to density gradient centrifugation to fractionate the sponge and bacterial cells, and then the localization of calyculin A in conjunction with the phosphatase activity of each fraction was examined. As shown in Fig. S11 (ESI[†]), prominent phosphatase activity was detected in the Entotheonella fraction, in which calyculin A also accumulated.

We performed an imaging analysis by using two different Entotheonella cells associated with the same genus of sponges, *Discodermia kiiensis* and *D. calyx*, respectively (Fig. S12, ESI[†]). The Entotheonella cells associated with the marine sponge *D. kiiensis* are useful as a negative control, since *D. kiiensis* does not show wound-activated changes of any major metabolites in the extracts. The Entotheonella cells were prepared from the freeze-dried *D. calyx* sponge specimens and soaked in artificial seawater. Subsequently, the cells were treated with malachite green reagents and then observed by microscopy (Fig. 4). The green color was exclusively observed in the Entotheonella cells associated with *D. calyx*, while the Entotheonella cells associated with *D. kiiensis* were not stained. This result suggests that the substrate phosphocalcylin A is preserved in the cytoplasm. Upon sponge tissue wounding, the inner membrane of the Entotheonella cells is disrupted, as

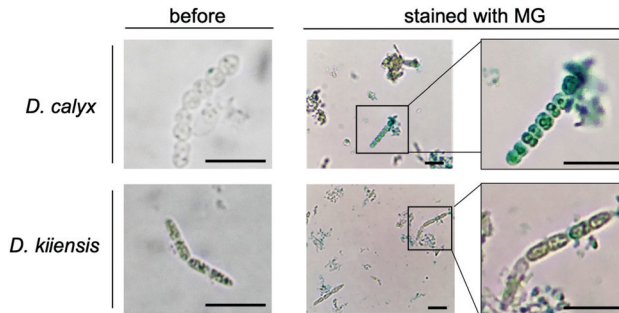


Fig. 4 Localization of CalL and its reaction place in the producer cells. To visualize the accumulation of free phosphoric acid in filamentous bacterial cells, cells were stained with malachite green reagent (MG). The left panels are the images of filamentous bacterial cells before staining. The right panels show high-magnification images of stained cells. Scale bars, 10 μ m.

demonstrated by the scanning electron microscopy (SEM) shown in Fig. S13 (ESI[†]), thus exposing phosphocalcylin A to the periplasmic space and triggering CalL-catalytic dephosphorylation.

Activated chemical defense strategies are prevalent in plants, such as terrestrial higher plants, mushrooms, and aqueous algae.^{12–15} The advantage of these systems is the on-demand production of a toxic metabolite, which is not suitable for constitutive storage due to its toxicity to the producer organisms.⁸ Calyculin A is the dominant metabolite produced by the PKS and NRPS hybrid pathway in the symbiont Entotheonella, and it is also potentially harmful to the host sponge because of its potent cytotoxicity. To circumvent self-toxicity, a mechanism to regulate the calyculin A cytotoxicity would be required for the sponge, *D. calyx*. The previously identified biosynthetic gene cluster of calyculin A and the encoded resistance gene *calQ* provided insight into the well-regulated, wound-induced process of calyculin A generation.⁸ The phosphotransferase CalQ detoxifies calyculin A and generates phosphocalcylin A, as a protoxin stored in the sponge holobiont. To trigger the activated chemical defense, an activating mechanism, in particular the enzyme responsible for the activation process, is necessary.

In this study, we isolated the activating enzyme that specifically dephosphorylates the protoxin phosphocalcylin A and identified it as CalL, encoded in the calyculin biosynthetic gene cluster in *Ca. Entotheonella*. CalL is a metalloprotein belonging to the binuclear MPE superfamily, with a signal peptide sequence at its N-terminus. The MPEs share the catalytic center that requires two adjacently positioned transition metal ions to catalyze the hydrolytic reaction.²² The characteristics of CalL, such as the metal-binding motifs, are diagnostic for PAPs as shown in Fig. 3, except for the pH optima and the sensitivity against EDTA, which has no effect on PAP at 10 mM.³¹ Although the tyrosine residue in motif II (Fig. 3) is conserved in both CalL and PAPs, the metal contents of CalL were different from the Fe(III) and Mn(II) of PAPs. Even in cultures of *E. coli* expressing the recombinant CalL in the presence of a high concentration of Fe(III), the purple color of CalL was not observed. The results demonstrated that the Cu and Zn ions are the catalytic metals in both the wild-type



recombinant and native CalL proteins, according to the ICP–MS data and the quantitative colorimetric assay. This is the first report to describe the heteronuclear Cu–Zn catalytic center in the MPE superfamily.²² Previously, Mitić *et al.* reported that the Fe(III) in PAP can be exchanged with a divalent Mn ion. Although the Mn-mutant was no longer purple, it retained the dephosphorylation activity.³⁵ This report demonstrated that CalL is also capable of chelating Cu and Zn, and showing its activity without a purple color. One of the prominent examples of a Cu/Zn metalloprotein is Cu/Zn superoxide dismutase (SOD), a scavenger of peroxide generated by oxidative stress,³⁶ in which the metal-coordinating residues of SOD coincide with those of MPE.³⁷ Our phylogenetic analysis of MPE domains indicated that CalL and its homologs represent a new clade that is independent from PAPs and any other phosphatases. The physiological roles of this enzyme family have remained unknown, except for CalL.

The phosphorylation-involved activation/deactivation process resembles the biosynthetic pathway of antibacterial aminoglycosides and NRPs, such as viomycin in Actinomycetes.^{38–41} Streptomycin and viomycin are produced as phosphorylated protoxins, and are excreted into the extracytosolic space to confer self-resistance to antibiotics. The well-known phosphotransferases StrA and Vph are responsible for the phosphorylation of streptomycin and viomycin, respectively.^{39,40} On the other hand, the streptomycin-producing *Streptomyces* species express a phosphatase (StrK) that is highly related to alkaline phosphatases, such as PhoA in *E. coli*.⁴¹ It specifically cleaves both streptomycin-6-phosphate and, more slowly, streptomycin-3''-phosphate. Likewise, VioS, encoded in the viomycin BGC as a homolog of StrK, is responsible for the dephosphorylation of viomycin phosphate.³⁹ All of these phosphatases are considered to be exported to extracytosolic spaces, as corroborated by the N-terminal signal peptide sequence featured in these phosphatases. Streptomycin and viomycin are exported in the phosphorylated form and then activated outside the cell by StrK and VioS, respectively.^{39,40} This mechanism of resistance, translocation and reactivation is required for the biosynthesis of these ribosome targeting antibiotics, which are highly toxic to the free-standing Gram-positive bacteria. This prevalent regulatory system of antibiotic biosynthesis is also found in Gram-negative bacterial producers of the genotoxin colibactin, which is biosynthesized from pre-colibactin and activated by the ClbP peptidase in the periplasm.⁴²

In the case of the sponge-derived cytotoxin, given that calyculin A does not exhibit antibacterial activity against any Gram-negative and positive bacteria, the calyculin biosynthetic pathway involving deactivation and reactivation processes is rather beneficial for the host sponge, *D. calyx*. A suite of protoxins and activation enzymes coexists, and they are compartmentalized in the dynamic machinery, which would confer chemical defense as well as self-resistance for the sponge itself. To compartmentalize CalL, the N-terminal signal sequence plays an important role in the periplasmic localization of CalL, as is the case for the N-terminal signal sequences of StrK and VioS.^{39,40} The N-terminal signal sequence (a.a. residues: 1–29) in CalL is composed of a hydrophobic helix structure

(residues: 13–24) and an A/V/SXA motif (residues: 27–29). The former is essential for anchoring to the inner-membrane and the latter is recognized by SPase I. A ribosomally synthesized polypeptide bearing a signal sequence is transported through a general secretory (Sec) pathway in the cytosol and moved to the inner-membrane as an unfolded pre-protein, which is then translocated toward the surface of the periplasmic space, where SPase I cleaves the signal peptide to release the mature protein into the periplasmic space.^{32–34} This Sec-SPase I pathway is also present in "*Ca. Entotheonella sp.*", since SPase I homologs (Protein sequence IDs: PON19655.1, ETX08252.1, ETW99059.1, and WP_179131489.1) are encoded in the genomes of *Ca. Entotheonella* *serta*, *gemina*, *factor*, and *palauensis*, respectively.^{43–46} Therefore, we envisioned that CalL is also localized within the periplasmic space, with the aid of the signal peptide and through the Sec pathway in the sponge symbiont *Ca. Entotheonella sp.* Indeed, we detected the cleaved mature form of CalL with not only the native enzyme, but also the recombinant protein, validating that the N-terminal sequence of CalL is also recognized by the Sec-SPase I pathway in the heterologous host *E. coli* BL21(DE3).

Conclusions

We have demonstrated that the phosphatase CalL, which originates in the *Entotheonella* symbiont of *D. calyx*, initiates the on-demand activation of calyculin A in response to environmental stimuli. The highly facile and site-specific activation process may provide significant opportunities not only for understanding the chemical defense strategies in marine sponge holobionts, but also for the on-site exposure of calyculin A targeted to cancer cells in combination with an enzyme-activated prodrug therapy.⁴⁷ Further research will be required to elucidate the intercellular cross-talk shared by symbiont bacterial cells and sponge cells involved in the wound-activated system.

Author contributions

Conceptualization: TJ, KM, IA, AT, TW, Methodology: TJ, YE, KM, IA, AT, TW, Investigation: TJ, YE, KM, Visualization: TJ, YE, KM, Supervision: IA, AT, TW, Writing—original draft: TJ, TW, Writing—review & editing: TJ, KM, IA, AT, TW.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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