

Does Secondary Structure Determine Tertiary Structure in Proteins?

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ABSTRACT Is highly approximate knowledge of a protein's backbone structure sufficient to successfully identify its family, superfamily, and tertiary fold? To explore this question, backbone dihedral angles were extracted from the known three-dimensional structure of 2,439 proteins and mapped into 36 labeled, $60^\circ \times 60^\circ$ bins, called *mesostates*. Using this coarse-grained mapping, protein conformation can be approximated by a linear sequence of mesostates. These linear strings can then be aligned and assessed by conventional sequence-comparison methods. We report that the mesostate sequence is sufficient to recognize a protein's family, superfamily, and fold with good fidelity. *Proteins* 2005;61:338–343.

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INTRODUCTION

Elements of local secondary structure – helices, hairpins and turns – form on a fast timescale.^{1,2} In the hierarchic model of folding,^{3–5} these local elements then further organize to form tertiary structure.^{6–8} How many ways can a given set of local structural elements be assembled into a coherent three-dimensional structure? Many ways? Several ways? Uniquely?

In globular proteins, primary structure determines tertiary structure uniquely,⁹ and based on this tenet, computer programs such as BLAST¹⁰ and FASTA¹¹ have been designed to recognize protein homologs in a database, using pairwise sequence alignment. Although similar sequence implies similar structure,^{12,13} the converse proposition does not hold: proteins with the same fold in the Structure Classification of Proteins (SCOP) database¹⁴ may have dissimilar sequences. Specifically, as the aligned sequence identity between homologous proteins falls below ~30%, successful detection by pairwise alignment diminishes markedly.^{12,15} In response, newer sequence-to-profile and profile-to-profile methods^{16,17} have been developed that boost detection sensitivity for distantly related proteins having similar structures. Such methods are still based on sequence comparisons. Recently, however, Honig and coworkers introduced a profile-to-profile alignment program¹⁸ that improves the performance of remote homology detection by combining secondary structure information with primary sequence.

In fact, the work of Przytycka et al.¹⁹ suggests that secondary structure alone may be sufficient to recognize tertiary structure. In their study, 183 proteins, with less than 30% aligned sequence identity,²⁰ were represented as strings of secondary structure elements, including turns

and loops. Using a simple scoring matrix, conventional pairwise sequence comparisons between these strings were performed and used to construct a *Przytycka-tree* (P-tree), in which the distance between any two nodes is proportional to the difference in score between their aligned secondary structure strings. The P-tree is generated completely automatically, and it reflects the global secondary structure relationships among the proteins used to construct it: the closer the nodes, the greater the similarity of secondary structure among their corresponding proteins. Surprisingly, the straightforward P-tree was found to be largely in agreement with the SCOP tree, although the latter is a complex construct based on structure, evolutionary knowledge, and human judgment. This result lends support to the hypothesis that successful fold recognition can be derived solely from knowledge of secondary structure.

We extend this idea here by quantifying the degree to which approximate backbone conformation can determine the protein fold. This question is of considerable practical interest in that such information can often be obtained directly from experiment, using residual dipolar coupling,²¹ for example.

In brief, our approach involves subdividing backbone ϕ, ψ -space into 36 labeled, $60^\circ \times 60^\circ$ grid squares, called mesostates (Fig. 1). Backbone dihedral angles were extracted from proteins of known structure and used to map each residue into its corresponding mesostate, after which the protein was rewritten as a linear string of mesostates. Pairwise alignment of mesostate sequences was performed using dynamic programming, with a mesostate substitution matrix derived from simulation.²² Our approach is related to the earlier work of Sali and Blundell²³ and of Eisenberg and coworkers.²⁴

SCOP family, superfamily, and fold benchmark tests¹⁴ were used for comparison with the following:

- (1) established pairwise alignment programs WU-BLAST, FASTA, and Smith–Waterman,²⁵
- (2) a sequence-to-profile alignment program, SAM-T2K,¹⁷ and
- (3) a structure alignment program, VAST (Vector Align-

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Received 24 February 2005; Accepted 8 April 2005

Published online 15 August 2005 in Wiley InterScience (www.interscience.wiley.com). DOI: 10.1002/prot.20622

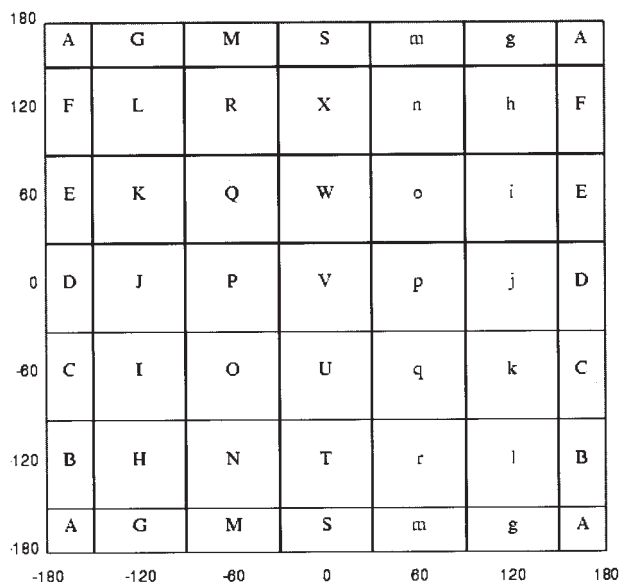


Fig. 1. Dihedral angle space for a dipeptide, partitioned into 36 bins, each corresponding to one mesostate.

ment Search Tool),²⁶ which is based solely on three-dimensional information.

Results indicate that our approach performed quite well for family recognition, and satisfactorily in fold and superfamily recognition.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Dynamic Programming

A Needleman–Wunsch algorithm,²⁷ MESO_ALIGN, was developed to perform global alignment between two mesostate strings, with allowance for a gap penalty. The primary alignment score between a pair of mesostates, $V(i,j)$, is the sum of two separate components:

$$V(i,j) = \text{MESO}(i,j) + \text{SS}(i,j) \quad (1)$$

where $\text{MESO}(i,j)$ represents the substitution score obtained from a mesostate substitution matrix, and $\text{SS}(i,j)$ represents the substitution score obtained from a companion secondary-structure substitution matrix.

The gap penalty, Gap , is also composed of two parts, a conventional affine gap penalty and an additional penalty when residues with repetitive secondary structure are aligned with a gap:

$$\text{Gap} = \text{affine_gap} + \text{additional_gap} \quad (2)$$

Differing affine gap penalties are assigned to central and flanking residues in a sequence of interest:

$$\text{affine_gap} = \begin{cases} 0, & \text{for flanking residues} \\ 20 + 2 \times l, & \text{for central residues} \end{cases} \quad (3)$$

$$\text{additional_gap} = l \times n_{\text{SS}} \quad (4)$$

where n_{SS} is the number of residues with repetitive secondary structure in the gap, and l is the length of the gap. The final score is the alignment score divided by the length of the aligned sequence, including gaps.

Substitution Matrices

The mesostate substitution matrix was constructed from hard-sphere Monte Carlo simulations of a nine-residue polyala peptide.²⁸ Five simulations were run in parallel, with each of the 10,000 cycles preceded by 500 equilibration cycles. The mesostate transition frequencies, $f(i,j)$, between any two mesostates i and j were monitored for the central residue, Ala₅, and averaged over the five simulations. To obtain a symmetric matrix, $f(i,j)$ and $f(j,i)$ were assigned their mean when the two values differed. The similarity score was then calculated as:

$$\text{MESO}(i,j) = \left(10 \times \log \frac{f(i,j)}{f(i) \times f(j)} \right)_{\text{int}} \quad (5)$$

where $f(i)$ is the total single mesostate occupation frequency, and 10 is a scaling factor introduced for convenience.

The secondary-structure substitution matrix was constructed subjectively, not calculated. Its elements were deliberately set to have smaller values than those of the mesostate substitution matrix to ensure that the secondary structure score would play a subordinate role in the alignment.

Mesostate and Secondary Structure Assignment

A mesostate assignment was made from three-dimensional coordinates by calculating the backbone dihedral angles for each residue and mapping them as indicated in Figure 1. In turn, the mesostate sequence was converted into one of four secondary structure assignments using PROSS²⁹ (available from www.roselab.jhu.edu): T(urn), H(elix), E(xtended), or C(oil). In detail, β -turns (T) were assigned to two-residue segments having mesostates from the set {OO, OP, OJ, PO, PP, PJ, JO, JP, JJ, Mo, Mp, Mj, Ro, Rp, Rj, oo, op, oj, po, pp, pj, jo, jp, jj, mO, mP, mJ, rO, rP, rJ}. α -Helices (H) were assigned to segments of five or more residues having mesostates from the set {O, P}. β -Strands (E) were assigned to segments of three or more successive residues having mesostates from the set {L, G, F, A, R, M}. Residues not classified into one of these three categories were assigned as coil (C). Finally, the secondary structure sequence was adjusted using the following three rules:

- (1) A single C residue flanked by helical residues (H) was converted to H.
- (2) A single C residue flanked by strand residues (E) was converted to E.
- (3) Sequences with more than five consecutive turn residues (T) were converted to H if all mesostates were from the set {J, O, P}.

SCOP Benchmark Test

SCOP domains (version 1.63) with less than 40% sequence identity were obtained from the ASTRAL SCOP

TABLE I. Programs Used in SCOP Benchmark Tests

Name	Package version	Source	Parameter
FASTA	FASTA3.3	ftp://ftp.virginia.edu/pub/fasta/	Gap = $14 + 2 \times n$
SMITH-WATERMAN	FASTA3.3	ftp://ftp.virginia.edu/pub/fasta/	Gap = $14 + 2 \times n$
WU-BLAST	WU-BLAST2.0	http://blast.wustl.edu/blast/executables/	Gap = $9 + 2 \times n$
SAM	SAM-T2K	http://www.cse.ucsc.edu/research/complibio/sam.html	Filter: WU-BLAST2.0
VAST	VAST	ftp://ftp.ncbi.nih.gov/mmdb/vastdata/	P-value cutoff: 0, 4

Database³⁰ (astral.stanford.edu) and filtered to retain only structures with resolution ≤ 2.0 Å. Domains comprised of more than one chain or fewer than four elements of secondary structure were also filtered. After filtering, 2439 domains remained in our library. The domain having the best resolution was chosen from each family with at least three family members, resulting in 113 domains for use in the SCOP family benchmark test set. Applying the same criteria, 144 and 159 domains were identified for the SCOP superfamily and fold benchmark test sets, respectively.

The programs used for comparison included FASTA, SMITH-WATERMAN, SAM-T2K, WU-BLAST, and VAST (Table I). Default parameters were used in all cases except that two different p-value cutoffs (0 and 4) were applied separately for VAST. The BLOSUM62 matrix³¹ was adopted for all sequence-alignment programs. All programs allow self-detection.

Global alignment algorithms do not follow an underlying probability distribution, and therefore empirical estimates, in the form of z-scores, were used to gauge alignment similarity. To obtain a mean and variance for each query domain, a random library with the same length distribution as our benchmarks was constructed by randomly connecting six-residue segments taken from the test sets. For every query domain, the programs MESO_ALIGN, FASTA, SMITH-WATERMAN, and SAM-T2K were scored against all domains in the test set. Z-scores were then calculated from the mean and variance obtained by running the same program on the corresponding random library instead. Specificity (accuracy) and sensitivity (coverage) were computed as a function of threshold using the formulae:

$$\text{Specificity} = \frac{\text{TP}}{\text{TP} + \text{FP}} \times 100\% \quad (6)$$

$$\text{Sensitivity} = \frac{\text{TP}}{\text{TP} + \text{FN}} \times 100\% \quad (7)$$

where TP (true positive) is the number of proteins that were correctly identified as belonging to the same class (i.e. family, superfamily, or fold) as the query, FP (false positive) is the number of proteins that were incorrectly identified as belonging to the same class as the query, and FN (false negative) is the number of proteins that were incorrectly identified as belonging to a different class than the query. Defined in this way, *specificity* measures the percentage of correct predictions, while *sensitivity* measures the fraction of the library covered by the predictions. Using these data, “specificity vs. sensitivity” curves were

	G	J	L	M	O	P	R	o	p	r	Z
G	8	0	4	3	-5	-2	2	1	0	-1	-2
J	0	10	0	1	-4	-4	-1	-2	-1	0	-2
L	4	0	7	3	-4	-3	2	1	-1	0	-2
M	3	1	3	10	-4	-3	2	0	0	1	-2
O	-5	-4	-4	-4	2	-4	-4	-5	-5	-4	-2
P	-2	-4	-3	-3	-4	6	-3	-3	-4	-3	-2
R	2	-1	2	2	-4	-3	10	0	-1	0	-2
o	1	-2	1	0	-5	-3	0	9	-1	-1	-2
p	0	-1	-1	0	-5	-4	-1	-1	10	-1	-2
r	-1	0	0	1	-4	-3	0	-1	-1	10	-2
Z	-2	-2	-2	-2	-2	-2	-2	-2	-2	-2	-1

	H	E	T	C
H	2	-2	-1	0
E	-2	2	-2	0
T	-1	-2	2	0
C	0	0	0	1

Fig. 2. The (A) mesostate and (B) secondary-structure substitution matrices.

drawn for each program. The mean and variance are not easily obtained for VAST and WU-BLAST. Instead, the score normalized by the length of the query domain (VAST) and the negative logarithm of expectation (WU-BLAST) were used in lieu of the Z-score for these two programs.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Substitution Matrices

The mesostate and the secondary-structure substitution matrices are shown in Figure 2. Elements of the mesostate substitution matrix are similarity scores between any two accessible mesostates as described in Materials and Methods. In physical terms, this score can be interpreted as the relative height of the energy barrier between any two states; transitions between dissimilar states (e.g., helical and extended) will then have negative scores. Only the 10 accessible mesostates are listed in the substitution matrix; all others are represented by “Z.” Accessible mesostates fall into three groups: right-handed helical {O, P, J}, extended {L, G, M, R}, and left-handed helical {o, p, r}. In combination, these 10 mesostates can adopt almost any

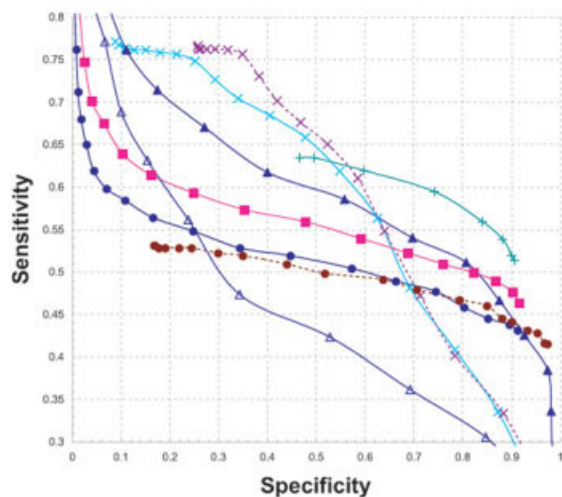


Fig. 3. Specificity vs. sensitivity curve of SCOP family benchmark test. Programs include: MESO_ALIGN (solid light blue line with triangles); SMITH-WATERMAN (solid pink line with squares); FASTA (solid dark blue line with circles); WU-BLAST (dashed red line with circles); SAM (solid aqua line with pluses); VAST with p-value cutoff = 0 (solid cyan line with forks); VAST with p-value cutoff = 4 (dashed purple line with forks). As a control, secondary structure alignment is also shown (solid blue line with open triangles).

secondary structure. Exceptions involve structures with mesostates from {A, F, m, j} that are found only rarely in the Protein Data Bank (PDB) or are accessible only to glycine.

The secondary-structure substitution matrix was constructed to reward correct alignment between elements of secondary structure, and, conversely, to penalize their misalignment. Similar to the strategy used by Przytycka et al.,¹⁹ the penalty is highest for attempted alignment between helix/turn and extended structure. Matrix values were chosen to be smaller than scores in the mesostate substitution matrix, such that the latter play the dominant role in aligning structures [in eq. (1)].

Benchmark Tests

Three benchmark tests are reported as “specificity vs. sensitivity” curves for the SCOP family, superfamily, and fold benchmarks, respectively (Figs. 3–5). Our mesostate alignment algorithm performs quite well in family recognition (Fig. 3). Additionally, there is improved performance over some previous methods¹⁸ in both fold and superfamily tests. Possibly, these ostensible improvements are merely for technical reasons: i.e. self-detection is allowed in our benchmark tests, and representatives in our test set libraries are limited to those with at least two other library members in each case. Nevertheless, the relative position of the MESO_ALIGN curves exceeds that of the pairwise sequence alignment programs (FASTA, WU-BLAST, and SMITH-WATERMAN) in all three benchmarks. SAM, a sequence-to-profile method, also exceeds pairwise alignment in all benchmarks.

Summarizing, MESO_ALIGN offers improved performance over pairwise sequence alignment programs. Indeed, cases can be identified in which MESO_ALIGN

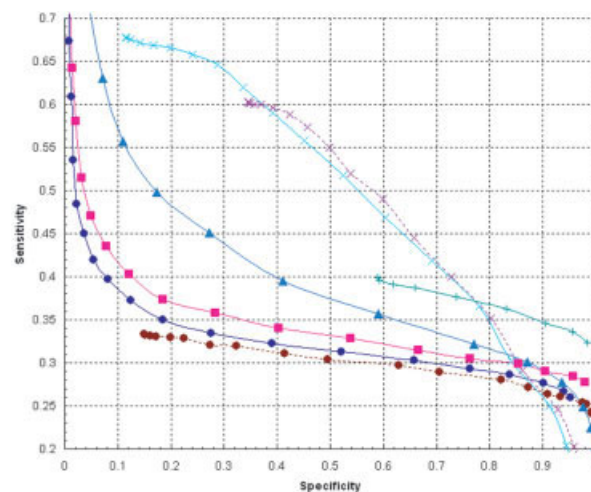


Fig. 4. Specificity vs. sensitivity curve of SCOP superfamily benchmark test. Programs and their annotations are as in Figure 3.

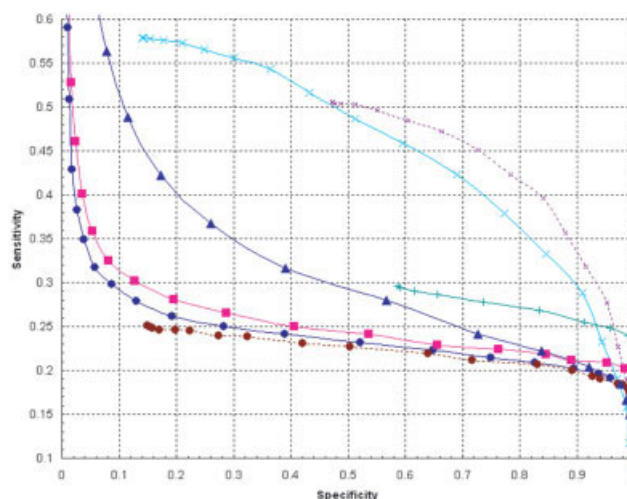


Fig. 5. Specificity vs. sensitivity curve of SCOP fold benchmark test. Programs and their annotations are as in Figure 3.

outperforms all other methods tested here; three such examples are given in Table II. In the family benchmark test (Fig. 3), its performance rivals VAST in the middle range and even exceeds VAST (as well as the other pairwise alignment methods) at high specificity (≥ 0.6), suggesting that mesostate information may be sufficient to determine three-dimensional structure.

Discussion

Despite the use of coarse-grained mesostates, crude matrices, a simple gap penalty, and a naïve pairwise alignment algorithm, the effective performance of MESO_ALIGN in family recognition invites the conjecture that secondary-structure information alone is sufficient to determine the overall tertiary fold. If true, the NP-complete problem of aligning two protein structures can be simplified to the polynomial-time problem of aligning two one-dimensional secondary structure sequences.

TABLE II. Examples of Structural Similarities Identified by Meso_Align But Not by Other Methods

SCOP ID	PDB ID Chain residues	RANK					
		MESO_ALIGN	FASTA	BLAST	Smith–Waterman	VAST	SAM
a.25.1.2	1KGN A: 2–297	2	1173	***	1371	+++	45
b.60.1.1	1LF7 A: 10–180	4	2360	***	2180	***	661
c.55.1.1	1BUP A: 4–188	3	1274	***	1231	+++	346

*** not found.

+++ found with P-value cutoff = 0 but not found with P-value cutoff = 4.

It is often assumed that structurally related proteins in the PDB are Boltzmann-distributed over a narrow energy range³² that has attained equilibrium during the time-course of evolution. Accordingly, the score in a PAM matrix can be interpreted as representing the free energy cost of residue substitution³³ in such a process. Similarly, the scores in our mesostate substitution matrix can also be regarded as the free energy cost of transitions between mesostate pairs during protein folding, given that they were obtained from Monte Carlo simulation²⁹ using the Metropolis criterion.³⁴ Furthermore, the total alignment score would then reflect the energy cost, relative to the self-alignment, of transforming one backbone conformation into another. Thus, an advantage of mesostate alignment is that it can detect thermodynamically interconvertible structures, at least in principle.

Another distinct advantage of shifting the focus to thermodynamically interconvertible structures is their lack of dependence on a global coordinate system. For example, altering a flexible loop between two protein domains could confound structural comparison methods such as VAST. However, the original and altered conformations would still be detected as thermodynamically interconvertible by mesostate alignment.

The approach described in this article can be regarded as an ongoing experiment, with opportunities for improvement. For example, our substitution matrix was derived from a rudimentary simulation and can undoubtedly be further refined. Other strategies for devising the matrix could also be explored. Strategies based on evolutionary arguments are especially appealing, such as generating the matrix from aligned homologs, like a PAM matrix³³ or from aligned key segments, like a BLOSUM matrix.³¹

Sequence information was deliberately neglected in this work because we wanted to test the degree to which secondary structure alone is sufficient for fold and family recognition. However, side chains play an important role in the folding process,³⁵ and their inclusion would complement and presumably improve detection sensitivity and specificity; see for example ref. 23. The inclusion of sequence information might result in apparent improvement for a technical reason as well: some SCOP assignments are based not only on structure similarity but also on sequence conservation at key positions. In such cases, the SCOP “gold standard” is not entirely compatible with algorithms based solely on backbone structure (e.g., VAST and MESO_ALIGN).

A final strategy for improvement involves reformulating the mesostate alignment program as a sequence-to-profile or a profile-to-profile algorithm. It was shown that compari-

sons using multiple sequences detect three times as many remote homologs as pairwise methods.¹⁵ A similar finding is evident in Figures 3–5: the performance of SAM, a sequence-to-profile algorithm, exceeds that of SMITH–WATERMAN, a pairwise method. Recent profile-to-profile algorithms enhance performance even further.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Dr. Steve Bryant for help with VAST and Nicholas Fitzkee, Patrick Fleming, Nicholas Panasik, and Timothy Street for numerous suggestions. Support from the Burroughs Wellcome Fund (HG) and the Mathers Foundation (GDR) is gratefully acknowledged.

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