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Conservation of *Cis* Prolyl Bonds in Proteins During Evolution

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ABSTRACT In proteins and peptides, the vast majority of peptide bonds occurs in *trans* conformation, but a considerable fraction (about 5%) of X-Pro bonds adopts the *cis* conformation. Here we study the conservation of *cis* prolyl residues in evolutionary related proteins. We find that overall, in contrast to local, protein sequence similarity is a clear indicator for the conformation of prolyl residues. We observe that *cis* prolyl residues are more often conserved than *trans* prolyl residues, and both are more conserved than the surrounding amino acids, which show the same extent of conservation as the whole protein. The pattern of amino acid exchanges differs between *cis* and *trans* prolyl residues. Also, the *cis* prolyl bond is maintained in proteins with sequence identity as low as 20%. This finding emphasizes the importance of *cis* peptide bonds in protein structure and function. *Proteins* 2005;58:589–595.

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Key words: protein structure; *cis* proline; homology; evolution; conservation

INTRODUCTION

In the early days of protein structure determination, it was broadly accepted that peptide bonds generally occur in the *trans* conformation.¹ But more and more structures are known that contain *cis* prolyl residues, and it appears that in earlier studies and with poorly resolved X-ray data, *cis* prolyl residues were often assumed as *trans*.²

Cis peptide bonds play a critical role in a variety of processes: The function of the Bowman–Birk protease inhibitor domain has been shown to depend on a critical *cis* prolyl bond.³ In several proteins (e.g., prothrombin- and mannose-binding protein^{4,5}), a *cis*–*trans* isomerization takes place after binding of ligands. In the case of prothrombin, the isomerization is essential for membrane binding.⁶ Prolyl isomerization can also influence ligand–substrate binding of enzymes,^{7–9} and isomerization of a single bond can dramatically change the protein architecture and act as a lever arm.^{10,11} *Cis*–*trans* isomerization was also shown to be an important step in regulation: the prolyl isomerase Pin1^{12,13} specifically isomerizes pSer/Thr–Pro bonds and thus acts in several steps in mitotic regulation (e.g., by regulating the dephosphorylation of Cdc25C and Tau protein).¹⁴ Several studies on proline mutants showed the impact of *cis* prolyl residues on folding kinetics¹⁵ and stability^{16,17} of proteins. The immunosuppressive effect of prolyl isomerase inhibitors (e.g., cyclosporin) is long known (see review¹⁸).

Hence, the prediction of a *cis* prolyl bond is important for structure prediction and homology modeling. Several groups analyzed different nonredundant sets of protein structures and tried to find local sequence-based rules for the occurrence of a *cis* prolyl residue.^{19–22} In general, one observes that aromatic amino acids often precede *cis* prolyl residues. However, these studies are based on just counting the occurrences of different amino acids around the proline without testing the predictive impact and thus relevance of the findings for structure prediction.

Not only the total incidence of *cis* prolyl residues but also the amino acid preferences varied according to different authors: While Stewart et al.²³ found that the Trp–Pro bond never adopts *cis* conformation while Tyr–Pro was in *cis* conformation in 25% of cases, Pal and Chakrabarti¹⁹ later found with an expanded database more than 10% of the *cis* prolines with a Trp preceding the proline, while Tyr–Pro only adopted *cis* conformation in 9.7% of the cases.

After all, an important question remains whether only the local sequence surrounding the prolyl residue or the general folding pattern controls the formation of *cis* prolyl residues. Studies on peptides strongly indicate that the amino acid preceding proline in a pentamer affects the *cis* prolyl content qualitatively in the same way as in proteins.²⁰ However, mutations of *cis* prolyl residues to alanyl residues sometimes lead to a *cis* alanyl residue,^{24–27} which would indicate that the overall fold of the protein directs the amino acid on this place to a *cis* conformation. An analysis of the conservation of *cis* prolyl residues also provides information about the importance of local versus global sequence environment, which would be relevant for modeling purposes.

In this article, we analyze the conservation of *cis* prolyl residues in related proteins and provide guidelines for the estimation of prolyl bond conformations.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Data Sets for Propensity Analysis

Subsets of protein structures from the Protein Data Bank²⁸ (PDB) with different sequence identity thresholds were obtained from the PISCES server.²⁹

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TABLE I. Occurrence of Nonprolyl *Cis* Amino Acids

Amino acid	No.
Ala	10
Cys	1
Asp	8
Glu	6
Phe	7
Gly	14
His	3
Ile	2
Lys	6
Leu	2
Met	0
Asn	10
Gln	2
Arg	4
Ser	13
Thr	14
Val	6
Trp	0
Tyr	10

For each prolyl residue, the torsion angle of the CO—NH bond (ω) with the preceding amino acid was calculated. Bonds with an angle between -45° and $+45^\circ$ were considered as *cis* prolyl bonds; bonds with an angle between 135° and 225° were considered as *trans*.

To include only structures of good resolution and avoid redundancy in the data set that might bias the analysis, we used a data set with 25% sequence identity threshold, resolutions of ≤ 2.0 Å, and *R*-factors of ≤ 0.25 obtained from the PISCES server. Prolyl residues of 1729 protein structures were examined. Considering only amino acids with at least 10 preceding and 10 succeeding neighbors, we found 742 *cis* and 14,502 *trans* prolyl residues, as well as 118 nonprolyl *cis* amino acids (Table I).

Propensity Analysis

To analyze the predictive impact of the amino acid composition around the prolyl residue, we calculated the propensity of each amino acid at 10 preceding and succeeding positions around the prolyl residue. To obtain a prediction value for each peptide, we multiplied these values for each amino acid of the respective peptide to yield the propensity to contain a *cis* prolyl residue. The propensity of a feature is defined as the fraction of *cis* peptides with this feature, divided by the fraction of *trans* peptides with this feature. We logarithmized the propensities, which are thus normalized to zero. Features with negative values direct a peptide in the *trans* conformation; features with positive values direct to the *cis* conformation.

The accuracy of the prediction was measured as area under receiver operating curve (AUC) value³⁰: Peptides were sorted by their prediction score and, starting with the highest scored peptide, successively added to the list of peptides predicted as showing a peptide bond in *cis* conformation. After adding each peptide, the specificity (fraction of correctly identified *trans* peptides, true nega-

tives/negatives) is plotted against the sensitivity (fraction of correctly identified *cis* peptides, true positives/positives). The integral under this curve is a good measure of prediction accuracy and equals the probability that a randomly chosen *cis* peptide has a higher score than a randomly chosen *trans* peptide. It can obtain values from 0.5 for a random assignment to 1.0 for a perfect prediction.

To obtain AUC values, the propensities were calculated based on a training set of variable size, and peptides in the blind set (the remaining data) were predicted. Since the method does not involve any time-consuming learning process, multiple training and blind sets can be evaluated to obtain statistically relevant results. The final AUC value is the mean AUC value of several randomly chosen training and blind sets.

Analysis of Homologous Proteins

Alignments of proteins from our data set with proteins from the PDB were searched for in the HSSP database.³¹ To avoid a bias from alignments with very prevalent proteins, we averaged the fractions of amino acids replacing proline or surrounding amino acids, respectively, for each protein in the data set. Standard deviations were calculated by bootstrapping.

Structural alignments for 4 Structural Classification of Proteins (SCOP) superfamilies (Table II; data obtained on April 15, 2004) were done using the combinatorial extension (CE) algorithm.³²

RESULTS

Like other groups,^{2,21,23} we found a strong dependence of *cis* prolyl content on the resolution of the protein structures (Fig. 1). In structures with high resolution, more than 6% of the X-Pro bonds had *cis* conformation, whereas in poorly resolved structures the fraction was below 3%. The fraction of *cis* prolyl residues was not dependent on the length of the proteins (data not shown). For our further analysis, we used only nonhomologous structures of good resolution (see Materials and Methods section).

To simulate predictions of unknown protein sequences, we randomly divided the data set into a training set, which is used to obtain the propensities, and a test set, which is predicted using the propensities generated from the training set. The fraction of the training set is variable: Small training sets use only a little data to “learn” and thus lead to poor results; large training sets result in small test sets whose prediction accuracy thus cannot be calculated precisely. We calculated propensity values for the amino acids around *cis* prolyl residues, which can be used to predict the conformation of prolyl residues. Taking 10 preceding and succeeding positions into account, the AUC value of the prediction rises to about 0.648 when the size of the training set is increased (Fig. 2). Even when taking large fractions of the data as a training set, the curve is still rising—obviously, a larger data set would further increase the prediction quality. We then tested which amino acid positions are relevant for the prediction. By

TABLE II. SCOP Superfamilies Used for Structural Alignment

Name	SCOP Code	No. proteins	No. prolines	No. <i>cis</i> -Pro
Restriction endonuclease-like	52980	144	1092	47
Microbial RNases	53933	242	1007	258
Nucleotide binding	51971	77	1009	52
Alkaline phosphatases	53649	77	1723	49

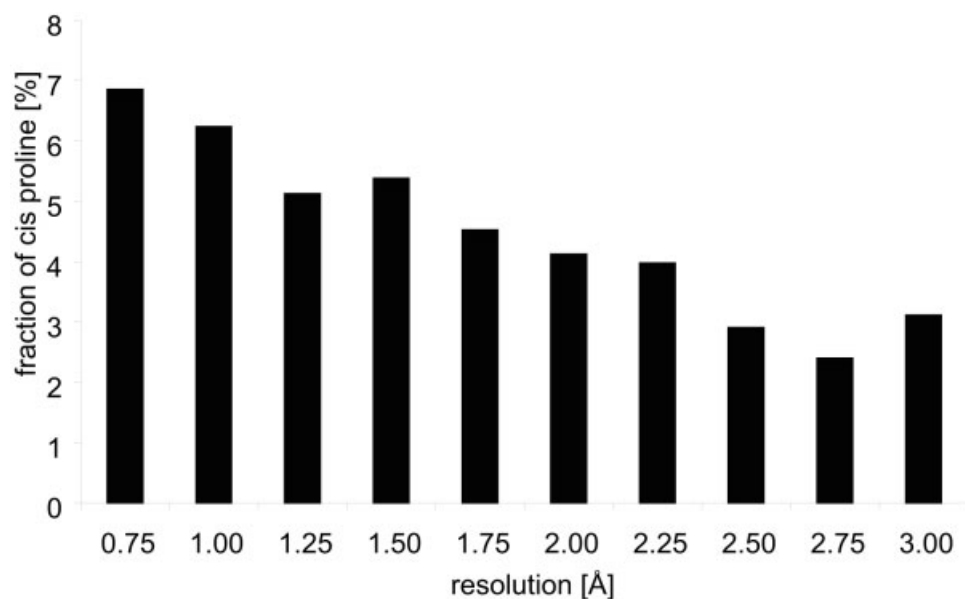


Fig. 1. Percentage of *cis* prolyl residues versus resolution of the data set. Protein structures with less than 25% sequence identity were separated into sets of different resolutions. Every bar shows the percentage of *cis* prolyl residues in proteins with a resolution in a window of width 0.25 Å around the specified value.

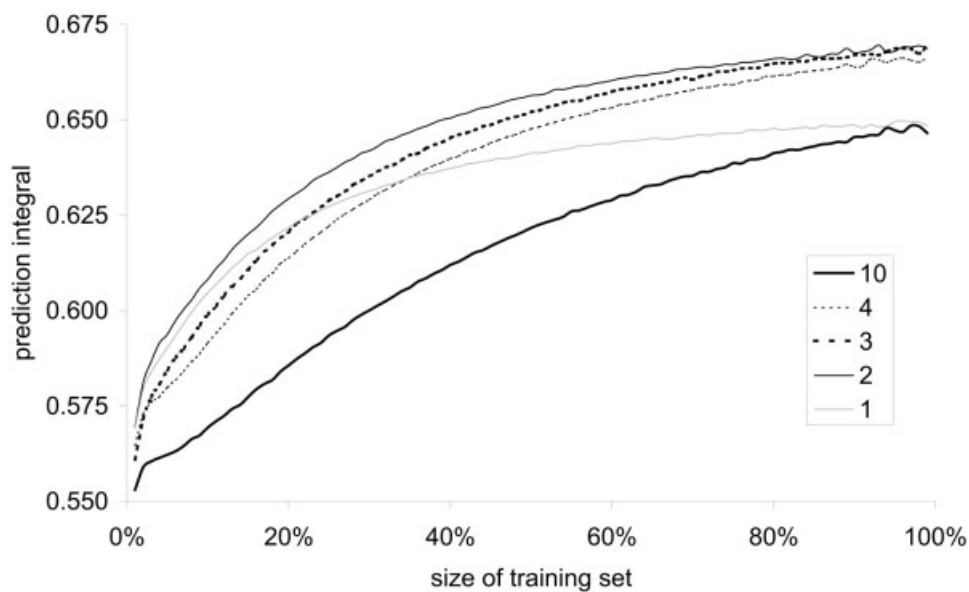


Fig. 2. AUC values for prediction of *cis* prolyl residues versus size of the training set. Starting with 10 preceding and succeeding amino acids around the prolyl residue for the prediction (bold line), the width of the sequence window used for prediction was narrowed to 4 (dashed line), 3 (bold dashed line), 2 (solid line), and 1 (gray line) neighboring amino acid positions. The training set was increased in steps of 1% up to 99%.

TABLE III. Natural Logarithms of Propensities for Amino Acids to Be at Specific Positions Relative to *Cis Versus Trans* Prolines

	-2	-1	+1	+2
A	0.03	0.26	0.00	-0.52
C	0.73	-0.27	0.44	0.54
D	-0.18	-0.54	-0.46	0.05
E	-0.22	0.33	-0.84	-0.49
F	-0.10	0.25	0.61	-0.06
G	-0.06	0.61	-0.02	-0.08
H	-0.05	-0.43	0.47	0.06
I	-0.31	-1.05	-0.10	-0.11
K	0.12	0.01	-0.25	0.05
L	-0.21	-0.75	0.18	-0.38
M	0.22	-0.13	0.02	-0.44
N	0.06	0.01	-0.08	0.37
P	0.27	0.49	0.30	0.83
Q	0.39	0.18	-0.15	-0.08
R	-0.38	-0.22	-0.26	0.12
S	0.33	0.07	0.07	-0.30
T	0.13	-0.29	0.12	0.27
V	-0.20	-0.68	-0.29	-0.04
W	-0.42	1.15	-0.03	-0.01
Y	0.04	0.84	0.70	0.13

Values > 0.5 and < -0.5 are highlighted by bold and italic, respectively.

narrowing the sequence environment around the prolyl residue that was used for the prediction, we could raise the AUC value to 0.669 when only using 2 preceding and 2 succeeding amino acids (Fig. 2). With the current size of the data set, apparently only information for 4 parameters could be reliably extracted, since more sequence information by a wider sequence window does not lead to a better prediction. As can be seen best at smaller data set sizes, more positions introduce noise and thus decrease the prediction accuracy. Note that even the AUC value with only 1 predictive position on both sides of the prolyl residue is also higher than the value reached with 10 predictive positions on both sides. Fewer predictive positions need less data to converge (note the more asymptotic behavior of the AUC value when fewer positions are used), and the risk of overfitting is considerably smaller.

The resulting propensity matrix is shown in Table III. The amino acids preferred as *cis* proline neighbors show no conspicuous overlap with preferences of prolyl isomerases.^{33–35} Grouping of amino acids according to several properties did not lead to an increase in prediction quality (data not shown).

We then determined the degree of conservation of *cis* and *trans* prolyl residues, as well as neighboring amino

acids (Fig. 3). While the amino acid positions next to the prolyl residue are as conserved as the whole proteins [Fig. 3(A and C)], prolyl residues themselves are considerably

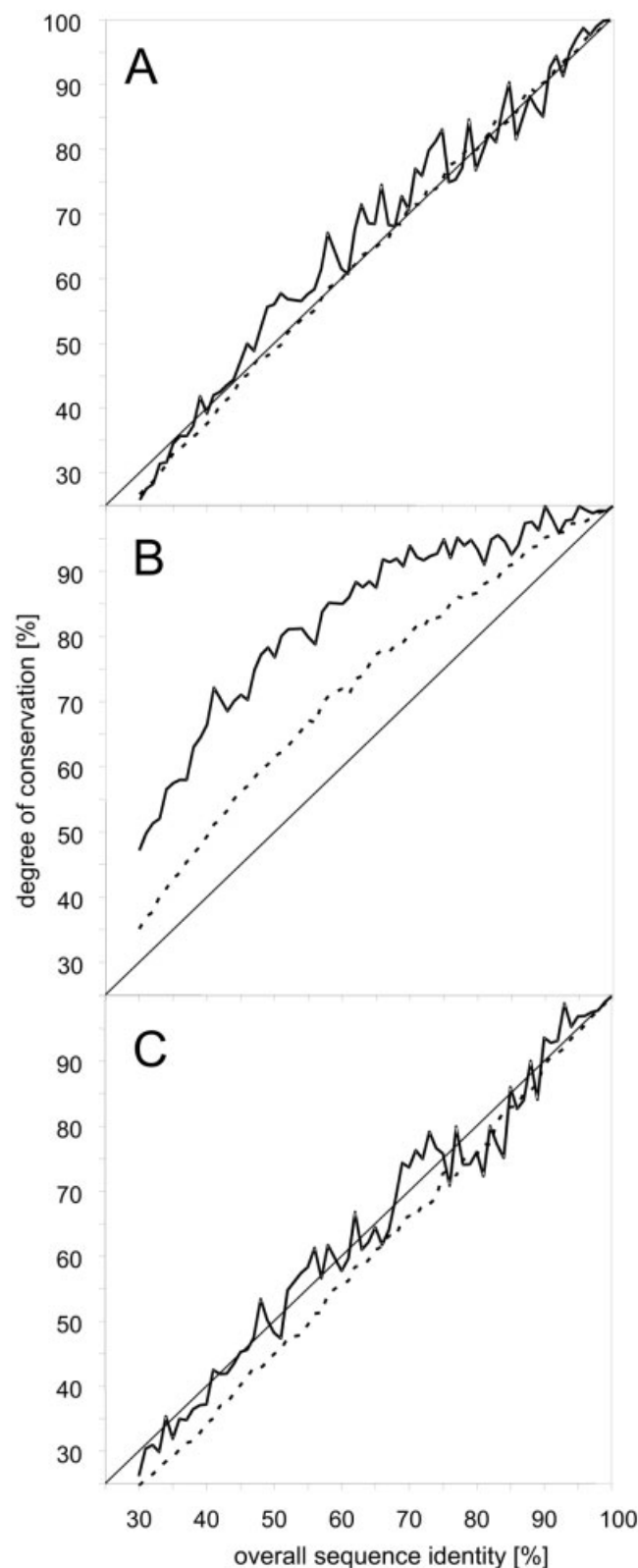


Fig. 3. Conservation of amino acid positions around the prolyl residue. For each prolyl residue in the *cis* and *trans* data set, multiple alignments from the HSSP database were compared. The degree of conservation of prolyl residues or neighboring amino acids is plotted against the percentage of conservation of the whole proteins. Solid line: *cis* prolyl residues; dotted line: *trans* prolyl residues. Thin line: conservation of the whole protein. (A) Residues preceding proline. (B) Prolyl residues. (C) Residues succeeding proline.

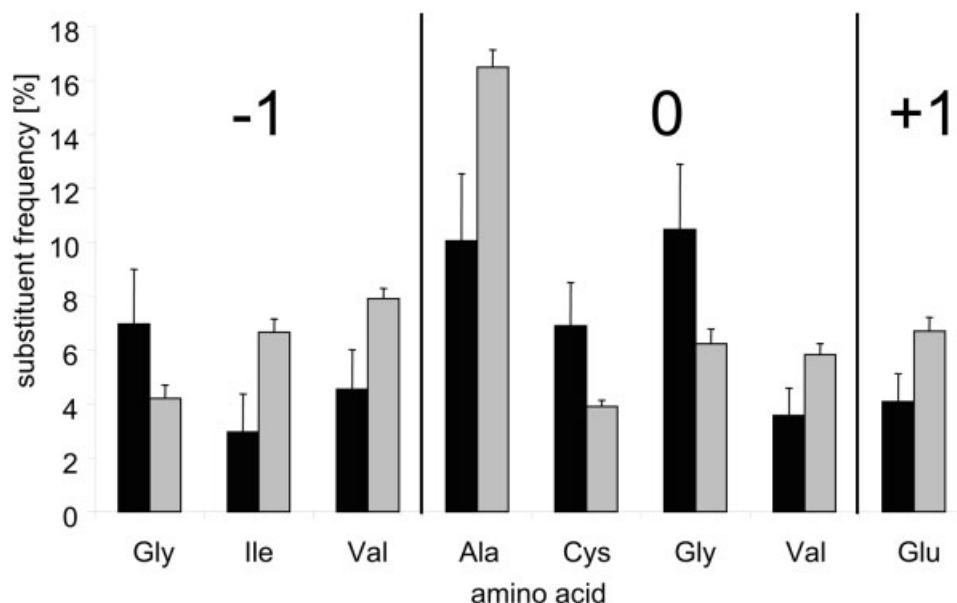


Fig. 4. Fraction of amino acid exchanges for residues preceding proline (−1), prolyl residues themselves (0), and residues succeeding proline (+1). Only amino acids with significant differences ($p < 0.001$) for *cis* (black) and *trans* (gray) prolyl residues are shown.

more conserved [Fig. 3(B)], with *cis* prolyl residues surpassing *trans* prolyl residues.

A comparison of exchange rates is shown in Figure 4. Amino acids preceding *cis* prolyl residues are more frequently replaced by glycine and less frequently replaced by isoleucine and valine than amino acids preceding *trans* prolyl residues ($p < 0.001$). Residues succeeding *cis* prolyl residues are less frequently exchanged to glutamate than residues succeeding *trans* prolyl residues ($p < 0.001$). These amino acid preferences represent the propensities shown in Table III. *Cis* prolyl residues themselves are preferably exchanged to cysteinyl or glycyl residues and less frequently changed to alanyl or valyl residues than *trans* prolyl residues ($p < 0.001$).

As the rather low AUC values have shown, the characteristics of neighboring amino acids alone are not sufficient to decide about the conformation of prolyl residues. Therefore, we studied the impact of local and global sequence homology between proteins from the PDB. For each *cis* prolyl residue, we gathered all peptides in the PDB with rising levels of sequence identity in a given window around the prolyl residue. For these peptides, we computed the fraction of peptides with proline in *cis* conformation (Fig. 5). Considering sequence identity over the whole protein, values of 30% are still sufficient to deduce the presence of a *cis* prolyl residue at a given position. With a declining width of the sequence window, higher degrees of sequence identity are necessary to be indicative of *cis* prolyl residues. Pairs of proteins with overall sequence identity lower than 30% derived from the PALI database³⁶ also show conserved *cis* prolyl residues (data not shown). To obtain a more comprehensive picture of the lower limit of sequence identity that still preserves *cis* prolyl residues, we structurally superimposed proteins of different superfamilies of the SCOP database³⁷ with each other (Table II

and Fig. 6). All proteins of one superfamily were superimposed pairwise with each other using the CE algorithm,³² and prolyl residues structurally aligned to *cis* prolyl residues were inspected. Figure 6 shows the fraction of prolyl residues aligned to *cis* prolyl residues where the *cis* conformation is maintained versus the pairwise identity between both proteins. Obviously, a sequence identity as low as 20% still indicates conservation of the proline conformation, whereas smaller values do not have any impact.

DISCUSSION

We were able to show that the sum of characteristics of only a few neighboring amino acids have a direct influence on the probability of forming a *cis* prolyl residue. As reported by other authors,^{21,23,38} the amino acid directly preceding the proline has the greatest effect on determining proline conformations. At this position, the aromatic amino acids tryptophan and tyrosine are strongly preferred. Like Pal and Chakrabarti,¹⁹ we found aromatic and small residues, as well as proline itself, on position −1 directing the bond to *cis*, and branched aliphatic amino acids to strongly speak against the formation of a *cis* prolyl residue. In contrast to them, we find no positive influence of polar amino acids. The positive influence of aromatic amino acids might be due to stacking of the 2 rings or $\text{CH}\cdots\pi$ interactions.^{19,39} The influence of amino acids preceding proline has been shown to be qualitatively the same in peptides and proteins,²⁰ which is a sign that the local sequence environment plays a role in *cis-trans* isomerization of prolyl residues. Also, the small glycyl residue in this position raises the probability of acquiring a *cis* conformation, probably due to the lack of steric hindrance.

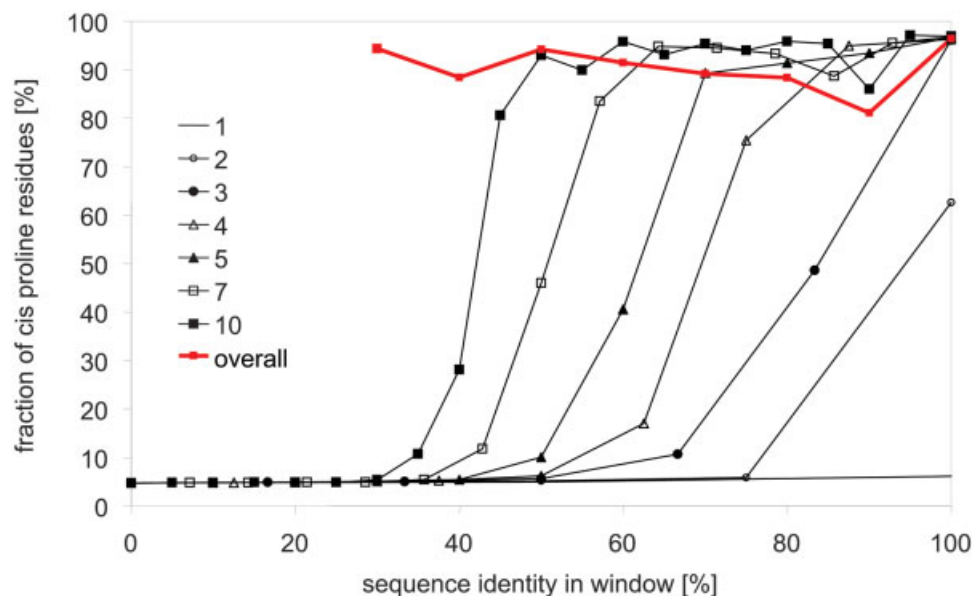


Fig. 5. Fraction of prolyl residues in *cis* conformation for peptides with different sequence identity to *cis* prolyl peptides. For sequence windows of various widths around the prolyl residue (different lines), the fraction is indicated. The line with filled squares shows the dependence on the degree of overall sequence identity.

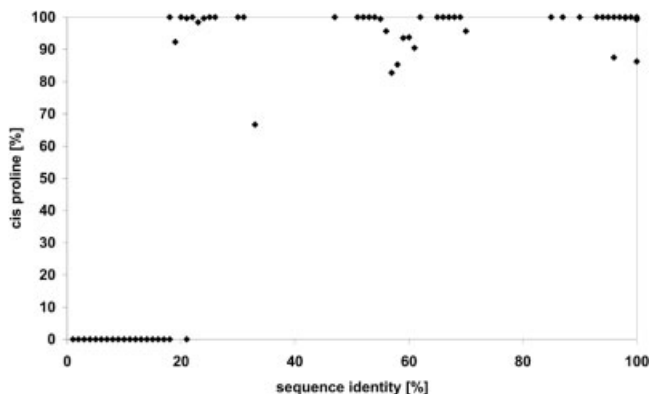


Fig. 6. Degree of conservation of *cis* prolyl residues versus sequence identity of proteins. All proteins belonging to four different SCOP superfamilies (restriction endonuclease-like, microbial ribonucleases, nucleotide-binding, and alkaline phosphatase-like) were structurally aligned with each other. The fraction of prolyl residues aligned to *cis* prolyl residues where the *cis* conformation is maintained was plotted against the overall sequence identity of the proteins.

Phenylalanine and tyrosine, but not tryptophan, also facilitate a *cis* bond when succeeding the respective prolyl residue. On position +2, proline and cysteine residues have the highest incidence to occur. While only looking at directly surrounding residues allows no reliable prediction, wider windows around the prolyl residue raise the predictive impact of sequence identity. A more reliable prediction can be made when looking at sequence similarity to other proteins containing *cis* prolyl residues. Since also the consideration of residues more distant from the central proline raises the prediction accuracy, we conclude that overall homology, and not only the local sequence environment, directs the prolyl residue to *cis* or *trans* conformation. This suggestion is

supported by the finding that overall sequence identity of only 20% is a solid indicator of *cis* prolyl residues. In homology modeling, the best decision about the presence of a *cis* prolyl residue can thus be made by modeling according to the highest resolution structure with more than 20% sequence identity to the query protein. As early as 1994, Sali and Overington⁴⁰ reported that the conformation of prolyl residues can be judged from the conformation of aligned residues.

The importance of *cis* prolyl residues can also be seen in the conservation analysis. While prolyl residues in general are more conserved than other amino acids, *cis* prolyl residues even surpass *trans* prolyl residues and have been described as the second most conserved residue type.⁴⁰ In addition to a higher degree of conservation (Fig. 3), the amino acid exchange pattern differs between *cis* and *trans* prolyl residues. We expected that the flexible glycyl residue is favored as substitute for *cis* prolyl residues, but also cysteine is favored as substitute in comparison to *trans* prolyl residues (Fig. 4). Obviously, some amino acids better approximate the critical role of the *cis* prolyl residues than others. The highest difference can be seen with alanine, which substitutes for *trans* prolyl residues in 16% of amino acid exchanges, while it only occurs in 10% of amino acid exchanges for *cis* prolyl residues. Alanine as the most frequent substitute for *trans* prolyl residues can be explained by the genetic exchangeability between proline and alanine (their codons differ by just one nucleotide), whereas the predominant substitute for *cis* prolyl residues, glycine, can be explained by the lack of steric hindrance.

Our studies underline that *cis* prolyl residues fulfill important roles in protein structures, are more conserved, and show different amino acid exchange patterns than

their *trans* counterparts. In contrast to local sequence motifs, overall homology is a much stronger indicator for the occurrence of *cis* prolyl residues.

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