

**Directed Evolution of Biosynthetic
Pathways to Carotenoids with
Unnatural Carbon Backbones**

Thesis by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

California Institute of Technology

Pasadena, California

2006

(Defended August 19, 2005)

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The opportunity to attend graduate school at Caltech has been a precious gift that I will treasure for the rest of my life. Working at this world-class institute with such talented, intelligent, motivated, and conscientious colleagues has contributed to my professional and personal development in ways I could never have imagined at the outset.

To my advisor, Frances Arnold, thank you for giving me the guidance and opportunities to develop and mature as a scientist. I have never encountered anyone who can cut directly through to the essence of an idea or concept the way you can, and I hope that some of your keen scientific vision and insight has rubbed off on me. Thank you also for always being truthful. It wasn't easy knowing that something I said, did, or wrote didn't satisfy you or come across the right way, but on the other hand, when you told me that my work was "excellent" or "just right," I knew you meant it and that really made me feel like I had succeeded.

To my other committee members, Anand Asthagiri, Linda Hsieh-Wilson, and Dianne Newman, thank you all for serving on my candidacy and thesis committees and for your insightful questions and comments.

I would like to thank the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada for the two postgraduate scholarships I was awarded, and the United States National Science Foundation for a grant supporting this research. I am appreciative not only of the financial contributions from these organizations, but also for the associated expressions of belief in the value of this research.

I would not have gotten very far in characterizing the carotenoids my cultures have synthesized without the dedicated assistance of Mona Shahgholi and Nathan

Dalleska. Thank you both for the hours of time you spent helping me with mass spectrometry, for answering my questions and critiquing my hypotheses, and most of all, for helping me to collect key data for this thesis.

Manish Raizada and Hyman Hartman contributed valuable comments that helped us to make the review paper reproduced in Chapter 1 significantly more focused and lucid. Gerhard Sandmann deserves many thanks for supplying me with valuable experimental guidance and eminently appropriate literature at just the right moments. I am also grateful to George Britton for his expert advice on the extraction and analysis of carotenoids from biological material. Shinichi Takaichi provided helpful assistance with the naming of the new carotenoids reported in Chapter 3.

Most of my fondest memories of Caltech involve the many wonderful students, postdocs, and visitors who have spent time in the Arnold group during my tenure here. I want to thank every one of these group members for contributing to the Arnold lab's wonderful atmosphere of interdisciplinary collaboration, for advice and ideas, and for good times at parties and other social functions.

In particular, I am indebted to Daisuke Umeno, who was my mentor and collaborator on the carotenoids project and who taught me how to clone genes, build plasmids, and “do” directed evolution. Daisuke, I am ever so grateful for your friendship, instruction, camaraderie, supportiveness, and truly unique sense of humor.

I wish to specially acknowledge several other members of the Arnold group: to Adam Hartwick, thank you for your friendship and for your ability to discuss carotenoids and their biosynthesis with me as only someone with your experience could. To Michelle Giron and Brenda Parker, thank you both for your contributions to the carotenoids

subgroup and for being such great students to mentor. To Joff Silberg, thank you for your friendship, advice, and the numerous conversations we had about everything from science and politics to family and food. To Michelle Meyer, thank you for being a wonderful officemate, for your friendship, and for all our conversations over the years. To Matt Peters, thank you for being so willing to answer (or attempt to answer) my almost incessant barrage of chemistry-related questions. To Jorge Rodriguez, thank you for your friendship and our many discussions of scientific and personal import. To Allan Drummond, thank you for your contagious passion for science and our fruitful and enlightening discussions. And to Geethani Bandara, thank you for keeping the lab running smoothly, for all your friendly and helpful advice, and for hosting such great parties at your home.

In contrast to my final year, my first four years at Caltech were not spent entirely in the lab. I am grateful to the members of the Caltech Beavers hockey team for their camaraderie and constant supply of memorable moments on and off the ice. In particular, I thank Adam Olsen and David Jenkins for their friendship and hundreds of hours of stimulating banter on the way to and from Sylmar. I would also like to thank my colleagues who served with me on the Caltech Graduate Student Council. My “GSC education” was highly complementary to my research education at Caltech, and I am appreciative of my fellow board members for helping me to improve my “soft” and leadership skills.

When I think about the path of my professional life, two of my teachers stand out as having profoundly influenced my choice to pursue a career in engineering. Charles Ledger and Fraser Simpson, my junior high school mathematics teachers, were truly in a

class of their own. They ignited my passion for math and problem-solving with their contagious enthusiasm and love for the subject as well as their innovative teaching methods (dissatisfied with the textbooks of the day, they designed their own curriculum and somehow convinced the school board to let them teach it). I might have pursued the same career path had I not been taught by Mr. Simpson and Mr. Ledger, but I doubt I would have done so with quite the same vigor.

To J.R., I am much obliged to you for your sage guidance and for improving my self-awareness. Your attentive ear and knowledgeable advice have assisted me through many of life's trials and have helped me to tame my worries. I am no doubt a better person to myself and others because of you.

My parents, Lili and David Tobias, deserve special recognition for their love and guidance and for encouraging me to explore my curiosity about the world in myriad ways. Mom and Dad, the lessons you worked so hard to teach me have served me well: finish your homework before you play, do it right the first time, respect other people and their property, help others in need, and wait for things to go on sale. Thank you for giving me just the right amount of freedom and responsibility when I was growing up so that I could learn to be independent but not get into too much trouble.

To Mikael, thank you for being the best brother anyone could ask for. I think part of our special bond is rooted in our choice of careers, which are quite different but also appealing to both of us. This allows us to live vicariously through each other, so that I get a taste of the life of a musician and you can experience a bit of life as a scientist. Although we haven't lived in the same city for some time now, I can't imagine life without you and I am grateful for our e-mails, telephone calls, and visits.

To my dearest Jill, thank you for your boundless love, compassion, understanding, and support. I feel the bond of our marriage grow stronger every day, and to be your husband is the ultimate privilege. Thank you for cheering me up when my experiments weren't working, for bringing me dinner at the lab when I could take only a short break, and for waiting for me all those times when I needed "just another 15 minutes" before I could come home. Thank you also for celebrating my successes and milestones with me, but more importantly, for insisting that these moments be celebrated when I didn't feel up to it at first. For all you have contributed, I feel like we have completed this thesis together. As we embark on the next chapter of our lives, I look forward to all the new experiences, moments, and memories that I will have the honor of sharing with you.

ABSTRACT

Over the course of evolution, nature continually discovers new small molecules through the alteration of biosynthetic enzymes and pathways by mutation and gene transfer. Hundreds of these natural products have proven indispensable to medicine, culture, and technology, greatly contributing to increases in the length and quality of human lives. Chemists have found that the “chemical space” surrounding natural products is especially rich in functional molecules, and synthesis of natural product analogs has uncovered many with new or improved properties.

Inspired by nature’s search algorithm, we and others have conducted our own evolution of carotenoid biosynthetic pathways in the laboratory. Chapter 1 comprehensively reviews the motivations, accomplishments, and challenges of this research area as of early 2005, and describes in detail how biosynthetic routes to dozens of new carotenoids have been established.

To expand the number of carotenoid backbones beyond the C₃₀ and C₄₀ carbon scaffolds that give rise to the ~700 known natural carotenoids, we subjected a carotenoid synthase, the enzyme responsible for carotenoid backbone synthesis, to directed evolution. Chapter 2 describes the evolution of the C₃₀ carotenoid synthase CrtM from *Staphylococcus aureus* for the ability to synthesize C₄₀ carotenoids. This work also resulted in novel carotenoids with C₃₅ backbones. We later found that some of the CrtM mutants generated in this laboratory evolution experiment, as well as several second-generation variants, are also capable of synthesizing unnatural C₄₅ and C₅₀ carotenoid backbones when supplied with appropriate prenyl diphosphate precursors.

Chapter 3 describes the creation of full-fledged pathways to carotenoid pigments based on the C₄₅ and C₅₀ scaffolds. Coexpression of the carotenoid desaturase CrtI from *Erwinia uredovora* resulted in the biosynthesis of at least 10 new C₄₅ and C₅₀ carotenoids with different systems of conjugated double bonds. We also present evidence of an unnatural asymmetric C₄₀ carotenoid pathway beginning with the condensation of farnesyl diphosphate (FPP, C₁₅PP) and farnesylgeranyl diphosphate (FGPP, C₂₅PP). In addition to clarifying how CrtM and CrtI achieve their product specificities, this work also sheds light on the molecular mechanisms used by evolution to access new chemical diversity and the selective pressures that have shaped natural product biosynthesis.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT.....	viii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	x
LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES	xiii
CHAPTER 1—Diversifying Carotenoid Biosynthetic Pathways in the Laboratory	
Summary	2
Introduction.....	3
Overview of carotenoid biosynthetic pathways.....	5
Carotenoids as a model system for laboratory pathway evolution	8
Evolvable pathways and enzymes	11
Approaches to engineering novel biosynthetic pathways.....	14
Engineering pathways by gene assembly	14
Engineering pathways by directed enzyme evolution	17
Probing the evolvability of carotenoid biosynthetic enzymes and pathways	19
Directed evolution of key carotenoid biosynthetic enzymes	19
Creation of pathways to carotenoids with new carbon scaffolds.....	37
Discussion and future directions.....	43
Revised view of carotenoid biosynthetic pathways.....	43
Future challenge: specific pathways	44
Prospects and challenges for diversifying other pathways by laboratory evolution	47
Conclusions.....	53
References.....	75

CHAPTER 2—Evolution of the C₃₀ Carotenoid Synthase CrtM for Function in a
C₄₀ Pathway

Summary.....	92
Introduction.....	93
Results and Discussion	95
Constructing pathways for C ₃₀ and C ₄₀ carotenoids	95
Functional analysis of CrtM and CrtB swapped into their respective foreign pathways	97
Screening for synthase function in a foreign pathway.....	99
Evolution of 4,4'-diapophytoene synthase (CrtM) for function in a C ₄₀ pathway.....	100
Carotenoid production of evolved CrtM variants.....	101
Direct product distribution of CrtM variants in the presence of GGPP (C ₂₀ PP).....	102
Comparison of the C ₄₀ and C ₃₀ performance of CrtM variants	103
Analysis of mutations	104
Structural considerations: mapping mutations onto human squalene synthase.....	104
Evolution of phytoene synthase (CrtB) in a C ₃₀ pathway.....	106
Conclusions.....	108
Materials and Methods.....	109
Materials	109
Plasmid construction.....	110
Error-prone PCR mutagenesis and screening	110
Pigment analysis	112
References.....	127

CHAPTER 3—Taking Natural Products to New Lengths: Biosynthesis of Novel Carotenoid Families Based on Unnatural Carbon Scaffolds	
Summary.....	132
Introduction.....	133
Results.....	136
CrtI desaturates unnatural C ₄₅ , C ₅₀ , and asymmetric C ₄₀ carotenoid backbones, resulting in the biosynthesis of numerous novel carotenoids	136
<i>E. coli</i> expressing only BstFPS _{Y81A} and a variant of CrtM accumulate hydroxylated carotenoid backbones.....	140
<i>In vitro</i> desaturation experiments with CrtI.....	142
Carotenoid biosynthesis in cultures expressing the C ₂₅ PP synthase from <i>Aeropyrum pernix</i>	146
The distribution of carotenoids synthesized by cells expressing BstFPS _{Y81A} is strongly influenced by Idi overexpression and physiological state	148
Attempted creation of a C ₆₀ carotenoid biosynthetic pathway	149
Discussion.....	151
Determination of desaturation step number by <i>Erwinia</i> CrtI	151
Evidence of an asymmetric C ₄₀ carotenoid biosynthetic pathway	154
Potential utility of novel desaturated C ₄₅ and C ₅₀ carotenoids	156
Origins of <i>in vivo</i> -hydroxylated carotenoids	158
Properties of nascent biosynthetic pathways—lessons for biology and metabolic pathway engineering	161
Challenges for achieving new pathway specificity.....	166
Conclusions.....	172
Materials and Methods.....	173
Genes and plasmids	173
Bacterial cultures and carotenoid extraction.....	175
Separation and analysis of carotenoids.....	177
Acetylation of hydroxylated carotenoid backbones.....	178
<i>In vitro</i> desaturation of carotenoid backbones.....	179
Iodine-catalyzed photoisomerization.....	180

Thin-layer chromatography and autoradiography analysis of isoprenyl diphosphate synthase reactions.....	180
References.....	205
APPENDIX A—Plasmid Sequences and Maps	210

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

Figure 1.1. Natural carotenoid biosynthetic pathways can be organized in a tree-like hierarchy	55
Figure 1.2. Selected examples of gene assembly leading to novel carotenoids in <i>E. coli</i>	57
Figure 1.3. “Matrix” pathway resulting from the coexpression of carotenoid biosynthetic enzymes with broad specificity	59
Figure 1.4. Chain elongation reactions catalyzed by natural all- <i>E</i> IDSs	60
Figure 1.5. Product length determination by CrtM and mutants thereof.....	62
Figure 1.6. Extension of laboratory-evolved pathways to 3,4,3',4'- tetrahydrolycopene and torulene by coexpression of downstream carotenoid modifying enzymes.....	64
Figure 1.7. The step number of the C ₃₀ desaturase CrtN is readily modified by mutation	66
Figure 1.8. Cyclization of carotenoids.....	68
Figure 1.9. Alteration of product specificity of the β,β-carotene hydroxylase from <i>Arabidopsis thaliana</i>	70
Figure 1.10. Several carotenoid cleavage enzymes display localized specificity	71
Figure 1.11. Generation of a C ₃₅ carotenoid pathway by gene assembly and directed enzyme evolution	73
Figure 1.12. Biosynthesis of C ₄₅ and C ₅₀ carotenoid backbones	74

Table 2.1. Mutations found in sequenced CrtM variants.....	115
Figure 2.1. Natural carotenoid biosynthetic pathways.....	116
Figure 2.2. C ₃₀ and C ₄₀ production systems used in this work.....	118
Figure 2.3. Typical plate with <i>E. coli</i> XL1-Blue colonies expressing a mutagenic library of CrtM together with CrtI and CrtE.....	120
Figure 2.4. HPLC-photodiode array analysis of carotenoid extracts of <i>E. coli</i> transformants carrying plasmids pUC- <i>crtE-crtB-crtI</i> , pUC- <i>crtE-crtM-crtI</i> , and pUC- <i>crtE-M₈₋₁₀-crtI</i>	122
Figure 2.5. Direct product distribution of CrtM and its mutants in the presence of CrtE (GGPP supply).....	124
Figure 2.6. Pigmentation produced by CrtM variants in C ₄₀ and C ₃₀ pathways.....	125
Figure 2.7. Reaction schemes for SqS and CrtM.....	126
Table 3.1. Properties of novel desaturated carotenoids synthesized by XL1-Blue(pUCmodII- <i>crtM_{F26A,W38A}-crtI-bstFPS_{Y81A}</i>).....	183
Table 3.2. Names of numbered carotenoid structures depicted in Figures 3.2-3.4.....	184
Table 3.3. Results of <i>in vitro</i> desaturation experiments with XL1-Blue(pUCmodII- <i>crtI</i>) lysate on various carotenoid backbones.....	185
Figure 3.1. Six carotenoid biosynthetic pathways from three prenyl diphosphate precursors.....	186
Figure 3.2. Desaturation in the C ₄₅ pathway.....	187
Figure 3.3. Desaturation in the C ₅₀ pathway.....	188
Figure 3.4. An asymmetric C ₄₀ pathway.....	190
Figure 3.5. Hydroxylation and subsequent <i>in vitro</i> desaturation of carotenoid backbones.....	192
Figure 3.6. UV-visible absorption spectra of novel carotenoids biosynthesized by recombinant <i>E. coli</i>	194
Figure 3.7. HPLC trace of carotenoid backbones extracted from a culture of XL1-Blue(pUCmodII- <i>crtM_{F26L}-bstFPS_{Y81A}</i>).....	196

Figure 3.8. Relative molar quantities of the carotenoid backbones produced by recombinant XL1-Blue cultures expressing BstFPS _{Y81A} and a CrtM variant.....	197
Figure 3.9. APCI mass spectra of unmodified, hydroxylated, and acetylated carotenoid backbones.....	198
Figure 3.10. Relative molar quantities of the carotenoid backbones produced by recombinant XL1-Blue cultures expressing ApFGS and CrtM _{F26A,W38A}	200
Figure 3.11. Idi overexpression and physiological state strongly influence the distribution of carotenoid backbones in recombinant XL1-Blue cells expressing BstFPS _{Y81A} and CrtM _{F26A,W38A}	201
Figure 3.12. Product specificity of <i>M. luteus</i> hexaprenyl diphosphate synthase (HexPS).....	203