Geothermics 50 (2014) 30–34

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Geothermics

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/geothermics

Adsorption applications of unmodified geothermal silica

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 22 February 2013
Received in revised form 16 July 2013
Accepted 1 August 2013
Available online 6 September 2013

Keywords:
Geothermal silica
Chromatographic
Adsorption
Protein separation
Phycocyanin

ABSTRACT

Silica, precipitated out of geothermal fluid discharged from a geothermal powerplant in Svartsengi on the Reykjanes peninsula in Iceland, was used as a chromatographic adsorbent to extract blue colored protein, C-phycocyanin, from *coccoid* blue-green algae. The only supplement used was salt obtained by evaporating the geothermal fluid. Analysis of the silica, using scanning electron microscopy, X-ray diffractometry and Brunauer–Emmett–Teller (BET) adsorption confirmed it has a high specific surface area and is amorphous. Upon adsorption and subsequent elution the purity of the extracted protein, measured as the ratio of the light absorbance of 620 and 280 nm, increased from 0.5 to above 2.0. Our results could facilitate utilization of a mostly unused byproduct of geothermal powerplants as chromatographic material.

1. Introduction

1.1. Geothermal silica

Geothermal resources are widespread throughout the world although generally associated with areas of volcanic activity. The HS-Energy geothermal powerplant is located in Svartsengi on the Reykjanes peninsula, south–west Iceland on a sequence of lava flows, the youngest being roughly 800 years old (Saemundsson et al., 2010). The geological structure is further characterised by interlayers of scoria and hyaloclastite reflecting interglacial and glacial periods. Since the lava flows, scoria and interlayers of hyaloclastite are highly porous and permeable, they allow seawater to percolate deep into their aquifers where it heats up and mixes with meteoric water (Arnorsson, 1995). Geothermal wells drilled through the lava flows to depths of up to 2000 m discharge a mixture (here referred to as geothermal fluid) of 2/3 seawater and 1/3 meteoric water with a temperature of about 240 °C. Due to leaching the hot geothermal fluid contains a high concentration of silicon (Si) when it enters the wells. Originally, the silicon is present in the hot geothermal fluid as silicic acid ($SiO_x(OH)_{4-2x})_n$. Upon cooling, the silicic acid precipitates as a three-dimensional network of coagulated primary silica (SiO_2) particles. The primary particles grow up to some nanometers in size before they coagulate to form aggregated clusters. Such a small particle size gives rise to high specific surface area, which makes the SiO_2 a suitable candidate for adsorption and catalytic applications.

Steam from the flashed geothermal fluid is used to produce electricity (output power of ~75 MW_e). The residual liquid is used in a heat exchange process (output power of ~150 MW_t) to heat up freshwater for district heating of local communities of roughly 20,000 habitants. This heat exchange process limits the minimum temperature for heat extraction of the geothermal fluid to about 90 °C. Most of the spent geothermal fluid is reinjected into the geothermal reservoir (~6×10^6 m^3 annually) but some of it (~1.2×10^6 m^3 annually) is discharged on the surface where it forms the Blue Lagoon (Grether-Beck et al., 2008; Petursdottir et al., 2009). A small fraction of the discharged fluid is bypassed to sedimentation tanks at the Blue Lagoon where it cools from 90 °C to ambient temperature. The cooling causes supersaturation of the silicic acid which in turn precipitates as amorphous SiO_2. The pH of the resulting supernatant is 7.7 ± 0.2, sligthly higher than the pH of the Blue Lagoon which is 7.5 ± 0.2. At 90 °C, the geothermal fluid contains about 600 ppm SiO_2 and thus the 7×10^6 m^3 of liquid being discharged and reinjected annually carries about 4000 tonnes. At 10–15 °C, a realistic ambient temperature, the SiO_2 concentration has dropped by roughly an order of magnitude (Fleming and Crerar, 1982) and thus a precipitation of over 3000 tonnes could potentially be harnessed annually from fluid discharged from the HS-Energy facility alone.

Few authors have reported on practical applications of modified geothermal SiO_2 and still fewer on applications of unmodified SiO_2. A possible use of geothermal SiO_2 as a filler in paper (Johnston et al., 2004) and as a precursor for silicates (Gallup et al., 2003) has

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.geothermics.2013.08.001

been described. In both cases the precipitation conditions had to be controlled. The use of natural SiO_2 modified with organosilicate materials, as a chromatographic material has also been discussed (Tarasevich et al., 1990).

1.2. Chromatographic silica

Silica gel ($SiO_2 \cdot xH_2O$) is widely used as an adsorbent in chromatographic columns for isolation and purification of compounds from a mixture. One of the most common methods for the analysis of basic pharmaceuticals is liquid chromatography (McKeown et al., 2001), which conventionally relies on synthetic silica and silica derivatives as the stationary phase. The production of synthetic chromatographic silica typically involves several chemical reaction steps followed by a series of after-treatment processes (Hoffmann et al., 2006; Zhang et al., 2009). In this paper we discuss the chromatographic application of unmodified geothermal silica. A comparison to sintered geothermal silica is also made.

1.3. Phycocyanin

The Blue Lagoon is a specific geothermal biotope known for its unique microbial ecosystem (Petursdottir and Kristjansson, 1997; Petursdottir et al., 2009). It contains about 6000 m^3 of geothermal fluid that is replenished every 40 h. The lagoon's temperature remain constant at 38 ± 1 °C. The coccoid blue-green algae, *Cyanobacterium aponinum*, one of the dominating species in the microbial ecosystem, is used in this research. A water-soluble photosynthetic pigment in blue-green algae, Phycocyanin (C-PC), is a protein that belongs to a family of phycobiliproteins. It is an accessory pigment to the green-colored pigment chlorophyll, also found in blue-green algae. Together they are an essential component of the algae's light harvesting system (McCall, 1998). Phycobiliproteins have in common a similar three-dimensional structure in addition to their hydrophilic nature. Among the many interesting applications of C-PC is its use as a fluorescent marker of cells and macromolecules (Ramos et al., 2010) and as a natural colorant in food and cosmetic products, replacing synthetic dyes, which are often unsafe or even toxic. C-PC has also been shown to exhibit bio-activity (Eriksen, 2008) which makes it an excellent choice as an additive in food and pharmaceutical products. However, the use of C-PC in these products is dependent on obtaining the appropriate grade of purity. The purity of C-PC can be evaluated as the ratio between the light absorbance at $\lambda = 620$ nm and 280 nm (A_{620}/A_{280}), where A_{620nm} is the maximum absorbance of C-PC and A_{280nm} is the total absorbance of proteins. A purity of 0.7 is considered food grade, 3.9 reactive grade and greater than 4.0 analytical grade (Rito-Palomares et al., 2001). Despite the many possible applications of phycobiliproteins, their use is limited by the high cost of extraction and purification. Most of the methods used for purification of C-PC involve a sequence of operations that include precipitation, centrifugation, dialysis, ion-exchange and gel filtration chromatography and chromatography on hydroxyapatite (Rito-Palomares et al., 2001). The purification cost has been estimated at 50–90% of the total production cost (Patil et al., 2006). Thus, improvements in the purification procedure can lead to a significant reduction in the production cost. C-PC is unstable to heat and light in an aqueous solution and denatures at temperatures above 45 °C (Jespersen et al., 2005). This instability puts constraints on the possible processing methods that can be used. In the experiments described in this paper, unmodified geothermal SiO_2 precipitated from Blue Lagoon geothermal fluid was used as an alternative to other chromatographic materials to extract C-PC from the coccoid blue-green alga, *cyanobacterium aponinum*. When SiO_2 powder was soaked in a saline solution of a ruptured cell mass, the C-PC was selectively adsorbed in contrast to other hydrophobic constituents (such as chlorophyll). The attached C-PC was released from the SiO_2 adsorbent by washing with deionized water.

2. Experimental conditions

2.1. Algae cultivation

Blue-green algae, isolated from the Blue Lagoon, were cultivated in a semi-continuous mode in a 1.2 m^3 tubular photobioreactor at 45 °C at the Blue Lagoon Research and Development Center in Iceland. The cultivation media was geothermal fluid with 0.3% mass/vol Cell-hi WP nutrient from Varicon Aqua Solutions. Illumination was provided by a high pressure sodium light (160 μE/m^2/s). A fixed pH of 7.5 was maintained by regulating the CO_2 gas feed rate during growth. At harvesting, the algae suspension contained 12.2 wt% dry weight of algae. A 360 ml volume of the suspension was homogenized for 10 min using a 900 W ultrasonic cell crusher at 20 kHz (SYJ900-D from Sharpertek) with a duty cycle of 2 s on and 3 s off. Subsequently, the solution was centrifuged at 3200 × *g* for 10 min. A 288 ml volume of supernatant (referred to as crude extract) was obtained and collected.

2.2. Chromatographic silica

Raw materials used for the chromatographic recovery of C-PC consisted of geothermal SiO_2 (referred to as BL-silica) and geothermal salt (referred to as BL-salt). The chemical composition of the BL-silica and the BL-salt was determined by inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry (ICP-MS). The BL-silica was removed from the sedimentation tank and pumped into a filtration press at a pressure of 2 bar. The resulting filter cake was dried at 60 °C, crushed manually and sieved. After removal of the BL-silica, the BL-salt was prepared by drying the supernatant. The characteristics of the BL-silica (ground in a mortar), before and after sintering at 1000 °C for 2 h, was determined using a scanning electron microscope (SEM) and by measuring the specific surface area (BET), *t*-plot area and Barrett–Joyner–Halenda (BJH) average adsorption pore width (Micromeritics TriStar 3000 surface area and porosity analyzer). The mineralogy of the BL-silica was determined by X-ray diffraction analysis (XRD: Bruker AXS).

2.3. Protein extraction

Two different approaches for adsorption and subsequent elution were applied; method 1 and method 2. In the following discussion, we focus primarily on the latter procedure.

2.3.1. Method 1

BL-silica agglomerates, ranging in size from 0.2 to 0.7 mm, were packed in a 30 cm tall plexiglas column with a diameter of 5 cm. The column was loaded with ~190 ml crude extract (see Section 2.1 above) at a pressure of 0.4 bar. Afterwards, 2.2 l of BL-salt solution (25 wt% BL-salt in deionized water) was pumped through the column to flush the chlorophyll. Subsequently the C-PC was eluted using a continuous flow of 2.0 l deionized water. The pressure was gradually increased from 0.4 to 0.6 bar during pumping of the BL-salt solution and the eluent.

2.3.2. Method 2

BL-silica that passed through a 125 μm mesh screen was mixed with the crude extract and a BL-salt solution. The C-PC discharge was accomplished batchwise by alternating cycles of centrifugation and the addition of deionized water. A 100 ml crude extract (see Section 2.1 above) was mixed with 10 ml of saturated BL-salt solution (approximately 0.36 g salt per ml) and 20 g of BL-silica and then centrifuged. The supernatant was discarded and the sediment