



Inhibition of mouse liver respiration by *Chelidonium majus* isoquinoline alkaloids

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Abstract

The alkaloids from *Chelidonium majus* L. which had a significant inhibitory effect in mitochondrial respiration were those which contain a positive charge due to a quaternary nitrogen atom, i.e., chelerythrine, sanguinarine, berberine and coptisine, both with malate + glutamate or with succinate as substrates. When malate + glutamate was used as substrate, chelerythrine and berberine, which contain methoxy groups, were particularly more active, since they had a strong effect even at low concentrations. In submitochondrial particles, berberine and coptisine had a marked inhibitory effect on NADH dehydrogenase activity but practically no effect on succinate dehydrogenase activity, whereas chelerythrine and sanguinarine inhibited more strongly succinate dehydrogenase than NADH dehydrogenase, which is in agreement with the results found for mitochondrial respiration. Protopine and allocryptopine, which did not inhibit mitochondrial respiration, strongly inhibited NADH dehydrogenase in submitochondrial particles, but had no effect on succinate dehydrogenase activity.

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Keywords: Protoberberine alkaloids; Benzophenanthridine alkaloids; Structure–activity relationship; Mitochondrial respiration; NADH dehydrogenase; Succinate dehydrogenase

1. Introduction

Chelidonium majus L. is a plant which grows in the wild in Southern and Central Europe, part of Asia,

North America and in the Azores archipelago (Kadan et al., 1990; Pavão and Pinto, 1995; Colombo and Bosisio, 1996). Its use as a medicinal plant is very ancient (Paris and Moyse, 1967; Duke, 1985; Xème Pharmacopée Française, 1989; Bézanger-Beauquesne et al., 1990). The medicinal properties mentioned above can be ascribed to the more than 27 alkaloids present in the root and aerial part of the plant, which

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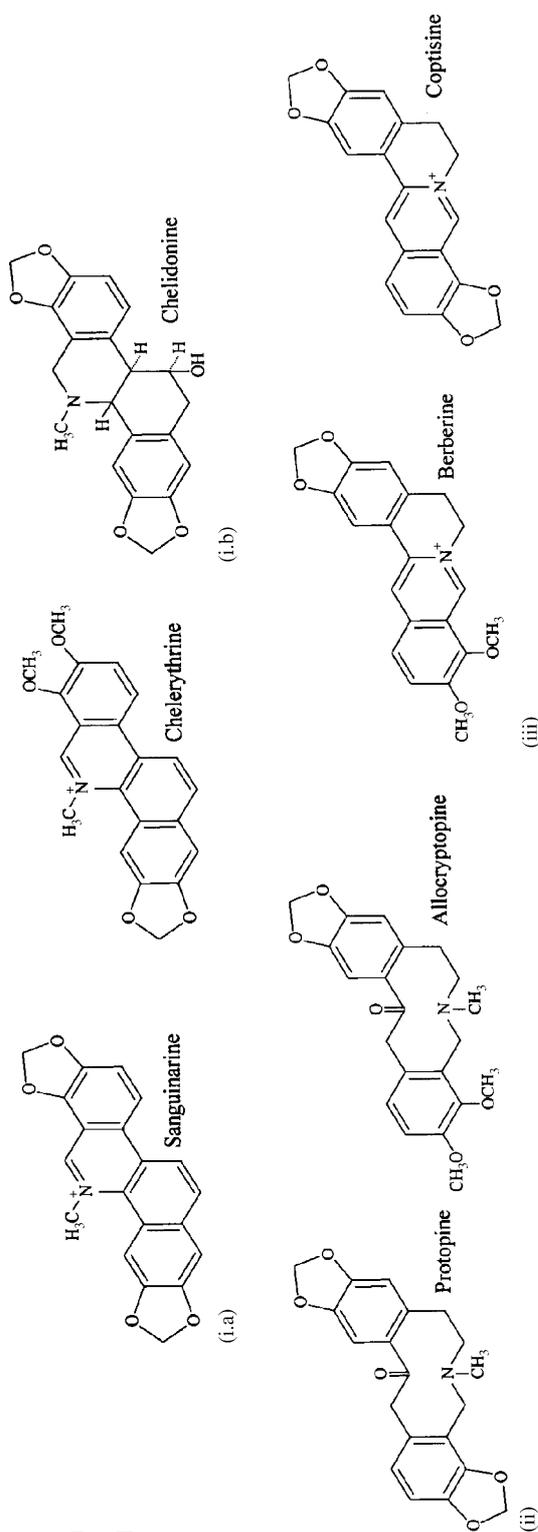


Fig. 1. Structure of the alkaloids used in this study.

42 belong to three main groups (Fig. 1): (i) benzo[c]-
43 phenanthridines, with two subgroups, (i.a) quaternary,
44 like chelerythrine and sanguinarine or (i.b) tertiary,
45 like chelidonine, (ii) protopine and derived thereof,
46 such as protopine and allocryptopine, and (iii) proto-
47 berberines such as berberine and coptisine (Lavenir
48 and Paris, 1965; Táborská et al., 1994; Pavão and
49 Pinto, 1995; Tomé and Colombo, 1995; Colombo and
50 Bosisio, 1996). The interest of this plant for medic-
51 inal purposes implies the need to know as much as
52 possible about the effects on metabolic processes
53 of the alkaloids it contains. Several alkaloids with
54 the same or related structures have been found to
55 interfere with respiration, either at the level of the
56 electron transport chain (Schewe and Müller, 1976)
57 or as uncouplers (Vallejos and Rizzotto, 1972). Since
58 mitochondrial respiration is the core of metabolic
59 energy, and therefore a process with major impor-
60 tance, in the present work we investigated the effect
61 of some of these alkaloids (Fig. 1) in respiration-
62 linked processes. We selected alkaloids from each of
63 the main groups found in the plants collected in S.
64 Miguel Island, Azores (Pavão and Pinto, 1995). The
65 effects of phenanthrene were also monitored, to allow
66 for effects due only to the aromatic structure of the
67 molecules.

68 The aim of the present work is (a) to ascertain
69 whether the effects detected follow a similar pattern
70 within each group; (b) if any effect which occurs on
71 oxygen uptake can be explained by events at the level
72 of NADH dehydrogenase (NADH:ubiquinone oxi-
73 doreductase, EC 1.6.99.3) or succinate dehydrogenase
74 (succinate:ubiquinone oxidoreductase, EC 1.3.99.1).
75 These two complexes were chosen by their crucial
76 role in the respiratory chain and by evidence from
77 other authors that these systems might be affected by
78 compounds of this type (Schewe and Müller, 1976;
79 McNaught et al., 1995, 1996).

80 2. Materials and methods

81 2.1. Animals

82 The animals used were male albino mice, with ap-
83 proximately 12 weeks of age and an average weight
84 of 20–25 g. The animals were fed ad libitum with a
85 commercial chow and tap water.

2.2. Alkaloids

86
87 Chelidonine, berberine chloride and sanguinarine
88 chloride were purchased from Sigma. The other al-
89 kaloids were a kind gift from Prof. Slavik (Masaryk
90 University, Brno, Czech Republic). The alkaloids and
91 phenanthrene were used in methanolic solutions. The
92 effect of methanol was tested for all types of experi-
93 ment, in the range of volumes added to the assay me-
94 dia, and found to be negligible.

2.3. Preparation of mitochondria and submitochondrial particles

95
96
97 Liver mitochondria and submitochondrial particles
98 were isolated according to a published method (Cain
99 and Skilleter, 1987). Protein concentrations were de-
100 termined using the Bradford Coomassie G250 dye pro-
101 cedure (Bradford, 1976) with bovine serum albumin
102 as standard.

2.4. Oxygen uptake by mitochondria

103
104 Oxygen uptake was monitored in a Hansatech
105 Clark-type electrode, model DW1 with a CB1 con-
106 trol box. Oxygen uptake by intact mitochondria was
107 monitored at 30 °C in the presence of either 10 mM
108 malate plus 10 mM glutamate or of 10 mM succinate.
109 The assay medium was 250 mM sucrose, 10 mM
110 Tris-HCl pH 7.4, 5 mM KH₂PO₄, 10 mM KCl, 5 mM
111 MgCl₂ and 0.2 mM ADP (Cain and Skilleter, 1987).
112 Protein concentration was 0.5 mg/ml assay medium.

2.5. Enzyme activity assays

113
114 NADH and succinate dehydrogenase activities
115 were studied on submitochondrial particles, to avoid
116 permeability problems associated with the use of in-
117 tact mitochondria. Enzyme activities, modified from
118 methods described previously by other authors (Cénas
119 et al., 1991; Liu et al., 1991), were spectrophoto-
120 metrically monitored using a Shimadzu UV160A
121 split-beam spectrophotometer, at 30 °C in 10 mM
122 Tris-HCl pH 7.4, and with a protein concentration of
123 0.05 mg/ml. For NADH dehydrogenase the reaction
124 was started by the addition of 0.1 mM NADH and the
125 decrease in absorbance at 340 nm was registered. The
126 basal rate of oxidation of NADH during the time of the

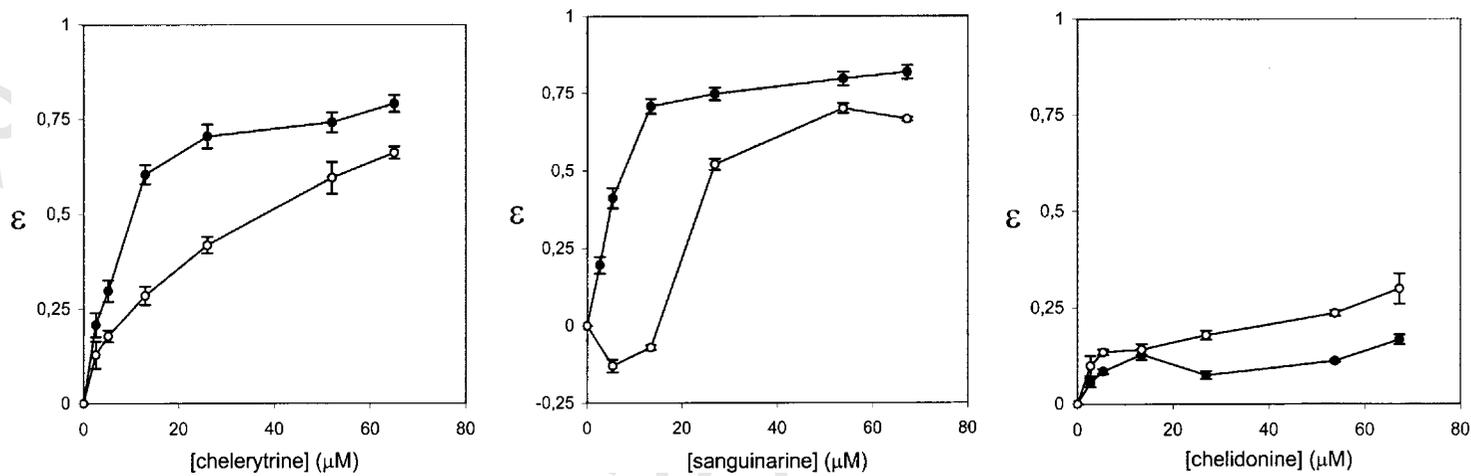


Fig. 2. Inhibition fractions (ϵ) of oxygen uptake by intact mitochondria in the presence of group (i.a) and (i.b) alkaloids. (○) Malate + glutamate (M + G), (●) succinate (SUC) as substrates. Oxygen uptake was followed in a Clark-type electrode. Concentration of mitochondria was 0.5 mg protein/ml of assay medium. Results are presented as mean \pm S.D. (control values: chelerythrine, M + G 16.6 ± 1.9 nmol $\text{O}_2/\text{min mg}$, SUC 33.3 ± 2.6 ; sanguinarine, M + G 17.4 ± 2.3 , SUC 27.5 ± 2.6 ; chelidonium, M + G 15.5 ± 2.0 , SUC 32.2 ± 3.6).

127 assay period was negligible. The medium for succinate dehydrogenase contained 0.001% dichlorophenol; the reaction was started by the addition of 10 mM succinate and the decrease in absorbance at 600 nm was followed.

132 2.6. Treatment and presentation of results

133 Results (media of at least three independent experiments) are presented as relative inhibitions or inhibition degrees (ε), to minimize variability between different mitochondrial extractions. ε was calculated as $(v - v_i)/v$; v is defined as the rate of oxygen uptake or the rate of absorbance decrease at 340 or 600 nm, in the absence of inhibitor and v_i the oxygen uptake or enzyme activity in the presence of an i concentration of inhibitor.

142 3. Results

143 3.1. Oxygen uptake by intact mitochondria

144 The effects of the several groups of alkaloids on oxygen uptake in mitochondria showed different patterns. Chelerythrine and sanguinarine, both contain-

147 ing a quaternary nitrogen atom with a methyl group, 148 strongly inhibited succinate-dependent respiration 149 and, to a lesser extent, malate–glutamate respiration, 150 while chelidonine, an uncharged phenanthridine 151 derivative, had virtually no effect (Fig. 2). Protopine 152 and allocryptopine, both uncharged and with a C=O 153 group, also had no apparent effect (Fig. 3). Berberine 154 and coptisine, both with an unsubstituted quaternary 155 nitrogen atom, had a marked inhibitory effect on 156 malate–glutamate respiration and a smaller, although 157 significant, effect on succinate respiration (Fig. 4). 158 Chelerythrine and berberine, which contain a quaternary 159 nitrogen atom and methoxy substituents, showed 160 a stronger inhibitory effect of malate + glutamate 161 respiration at low concentrations, when compared, 162 with sanguinarine and coptisine, respectively (Figs. 2 163 and 4). Phenanthrene had a very low effect on oxygen 164 uptake (Fig. 5).

165 3.2. Enzyme activities in submitochondrial particles

166 In submitochondrial particles, chelerythrine and 167 sanguinarine inhibited succinate dehydrogenase activity 168 to a greater extent than NADH dehydrogenase 169 (Fig. 6). This is a type of pattern similar to the one 170 found on oxygen uptake (Fig. 2). Therefore, the ef-

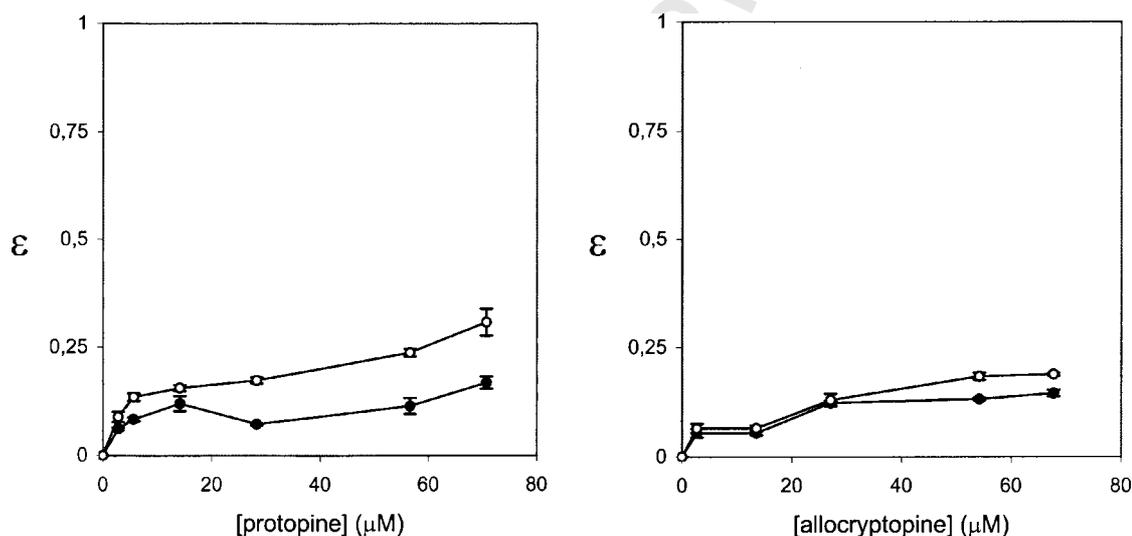


Fig. 3. Inhibition fractions (ε) of oxygen uptake by intact mitochondria in the presence of group (ii) alkaloids. (○) Malate + glutamate (M + G), (●) succinate (SUC), as substrates. Assay conditions were as described above. Results are presented as mean \pm S.D. (control values: protopine, M + G 14.4 ± 0.7 nmol O_2 /min mg, SUC 26.4 ± 2.2 ; allocryptopine, M + G 15.2 ± 2.0 , SUC 27.9 ± 1.6).

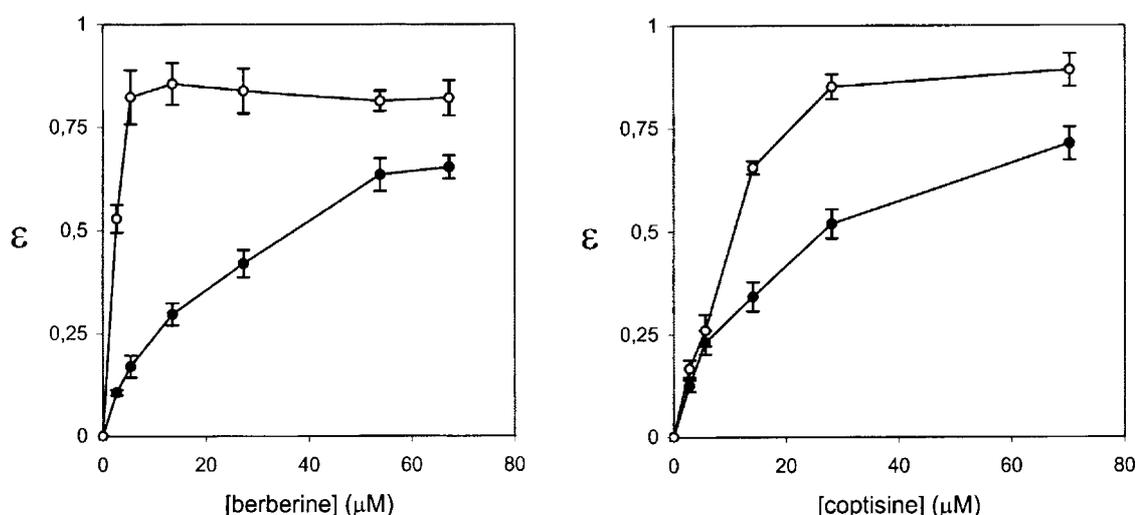


Fig. 4. Inhibition fractions (ϵ) of oxygen uptake by intact mitochondria in the presence of group (iii) alkaloids. (○) Malate + glutamate (M + G), (●) succinate (SUC) as substrates. Assay conditions were as described above. Results are presented as mean \pm S.D. (control values: berberine, M + G 17.5 ± 1.9 nmol O_2 /min mg, SUC 27.5 ± 4.2 ; coptisine, M + G 14.7 ± 1.7 , SUC 28.5 ± 3.5).

171 fect on mitochondrial respiration is essentially in
 172 the agreement with the effect on the two enzymes.
 173 Chelidonium caused a slight decrease on NADH de-
 174 hydrogenase but not on succinate dehydrogenase

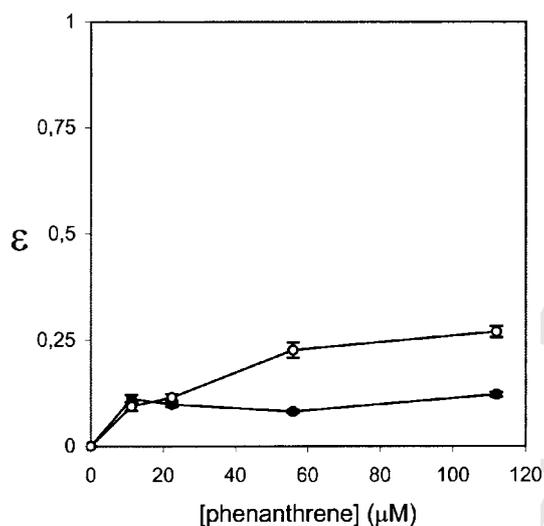


Fig. 5. Inhibition fractions (ϵ) of oxygen uptake by intact mitochondria in the presence of phenanthrene. (○) Malate + glutamate (M + G), (●) succinate (SUC) as substrates. Assay conditions were as described above. Results are presented as mean \pm S.D. (control values: M + G 15.7 ± 1.9 nmol O_2 /min mg, SUC 27.8 ± 1.6).

activity (Fig. 6). Protopine and allocryptopine had a
 very strong inhibitory effect on NADH dehydrogenase
 activity and did not affect succinate dehydrogenase
 (Fig. 7). Berberine and coptisine did not inhibit
 NADH dehydrogenase so strongly as would be expected
 by their effect on oxygen uptake, and had no effect
 on succinate dehydrogenase (Fig. 8). Phenanthrene,
 although it did not affect oxygen uptake to a great
 extent, had a marked inhibitory effect on NADH
 dehydrogenase in submitochondrial particles but not
 on succinate dehydrogenase (Fig. 9).

4. Discussion

The alkaloids with a charge due to a quaternary nitrogen atom presented a high inhibitory activity on oxygen uptake (Figs. 2 and 4). Some authors have already observed that alkaloids containing a quaternary nitrogen atom are the ones with the highest biological activity (Ulrichová et al., 1984; Dostál and Potáček, 1990; McNaught et al., 1995, 1996).

The alkaloids which contain a methyl group linked to the quaternary nitrogen atom seemed to have a more significant effect on succinate-dependent processes (Figs. 2 and 6). Berberine and coptisine had practically no effect on succinate dehydrogenase

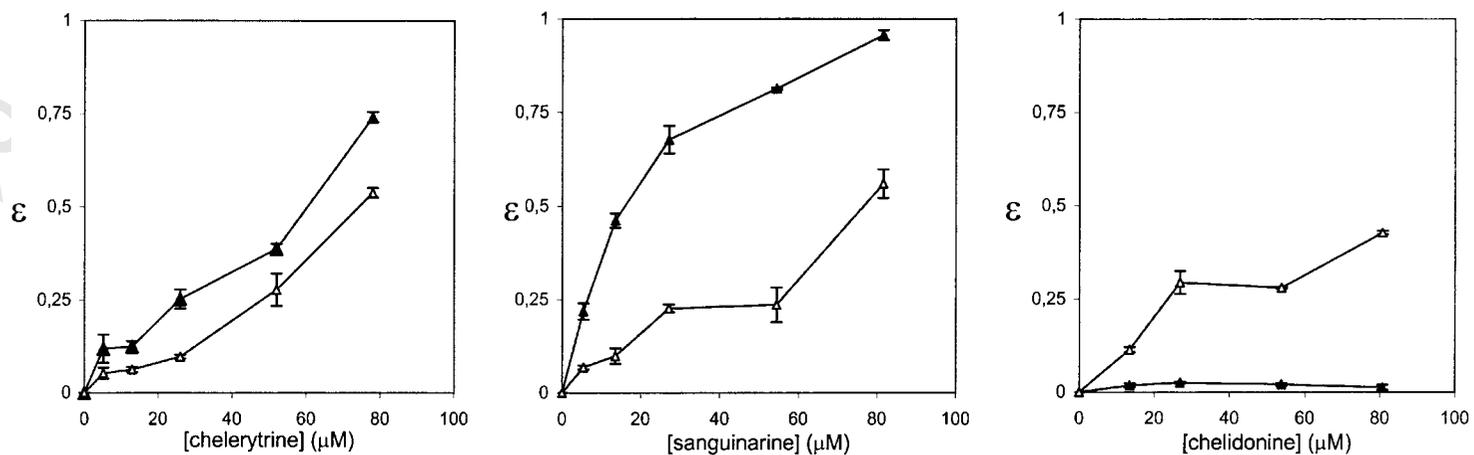


Fig. 6. Inhibition fractions (ϵ) of NADH dehydrogenase, NADH DH (Δ) and succinate dehydrogenase, SDH (\blacktriangle), in the presence of group (i) alkaloids. Enzyme activities were spectrophotometrically monitored at 340 nm (NADH DH) and at 600 nm (SDH). Concentration of SMPs was 0.05 mg protein/ml of assay medium. Results are presented as mean \pm S.D. (control values: chelerythrine, NADH DH $0.317 \pm 0.014 \mu\text{mol NADH/min mg}$, SDH $0.075 \pm 0.002 \mu\text{mol succinate/min mg}$; sanguinarine, NADH DH 0.235 ± 0.016 , SDH 0.073 ± 0.002 ; chelidonium, NADH DH 0.352 ± 0.001 , SDH 0.095 ± 0.001).

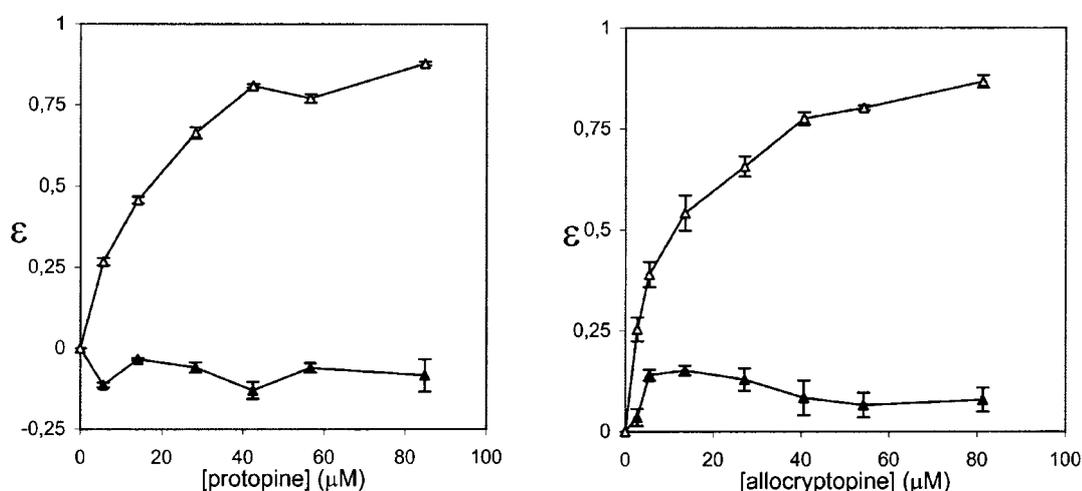


Fig. 7. Inhibition fractions (ϵ) of NADH dehydrogenase, NADH DH (Δ) and succinate dehydrogenase, SDH (\blacktriangle), in the presence of group (ii) alkaloids. Assay conditions were as described above. Results are presented as mean \pm S.D. (control values: protopine, NADH DH $0.293 \pm 0.018 \mu\text{mol NADH}/\text{min mg}$, SDH $0.071 \pm 0.005 \mu\text{mol succinate}/\text{min mg}$; allocryptopine, NADH DH 0.286 ± 0.023 , SDH 0.074 ± 0.005).

199 activity, although the inhibition of succinate-dependent
 200 oxygen uptake was quite marked. The pattern we ob-
 201 served in submitochondrial particles agreed with the
 202 results reported in another study (Schewe and Müller,
 203 1976), which reports the effect of berberine on NADH
 204 oxidase and succinate–cytochrome *c* oxidoreductase

in beef heart submitochondrial particles. The authors
 found that berberine had a strong inhibitory effect on
 NADH oxidase and a much lower effect on succinate
 dehydrogenase activity.

In the present work, the effects of the group i and ii
 alkaloids tested on NADH dehydrogenase were very

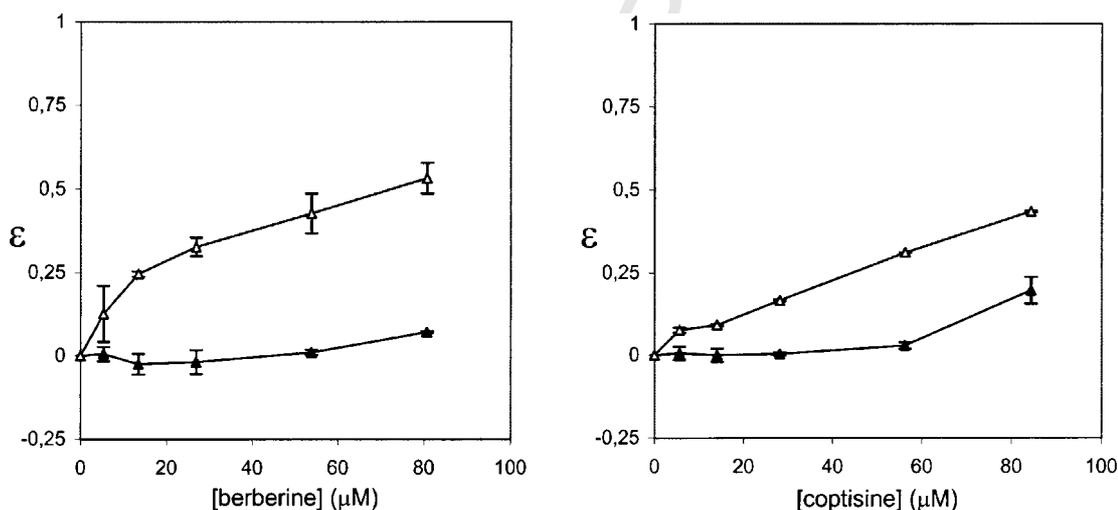


Fig. 8. Inhibition fractions (ϵ) of NADH dehydrogenase, NADH DH (Δ) and succinate dehydrogenase, SDH (\blacktriangle), in the presence of group (iii) alkaloids. Assay conditions were as described above. Results are presented as mean \pm S.D. (control values: berberine, NADH DH $0.338 \pm 0.016 \mu\text{mol NADH}/\text{min mg}$, SDH $0.116 \pm 0.004 \mu\text{mol succinate}/\text{min mg}$; coptisine, NADH DH 0.337 ± 0.009 , SDH 0.087 ± 0.002).

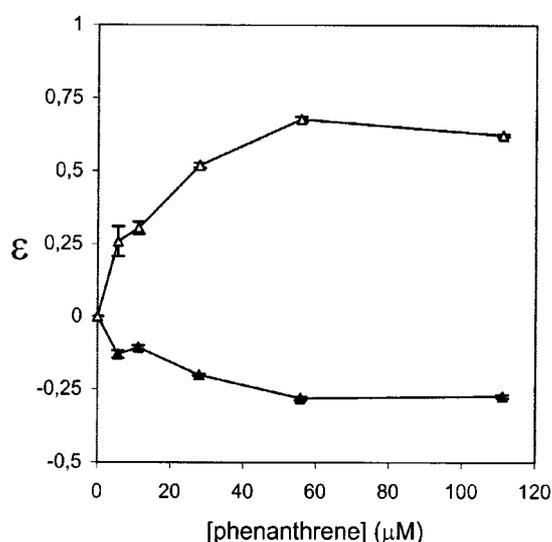


Fig. 9. Inhibition fractions (ϵ) of NADH dehydrogenase, NADH DH (Δ) and succinate dehydrogenase, SDH (\blacktriangle), in the presence of phenanthrene. Assay conditions were as described above. Results are presented as mean \pm S.D. (control values: NADH DH 0.286 ± 0.024 $\mu\text{mol NADH}/\text{min mg}$, SDH 0.075 ± 0.003 $\mu\text{mol succinate}/\text{min mg}$).

210 similar. The fact that chelidonine, protopine and al-
 211 locryptopine, bearing no charge, inhibited NADH de-
 212 hydrogenase but had practically no effect in intact mi-
 213 tochondria, may have been due to the abolition of per-
 214 meability barriers, since NADH dehydrogenase faces
 215 the inner side of the membrane in intact mitochon-
 216 dria and the outer side in submitochondrial particles
 217 (Harmon et al., 1974).

218 The comparative analysis between the results of res-
 219 piration and of enzyme activities suggests that the un-
 220 charged compounds we tested had more difficulty in
 221 passing across the mitochondrial membrane to gain ac-
 222 cess to the enzyme molecules. The analysis of results
 223 reported by another research group (McNaught et al.,
 224 1995, 1996) corroborate this hypothesis. These authors
 225 reported that isoquinolinium cations were more active
 226 inhibitors of respiration in intact mitochondria than
 227 isoquinolines. In mitochondrial fragments, the pres-
 228 ence of a quaternary atom was not essential for the in-
 229 hibition of complex I activity (McNaught et al., 1995,
 230 1996). This is probably correct since we found that
 231 protopine and allocryptopine produced a marked ef-
 232 fect on NADH dehydrogenase. The differences found
 233 between mitochondria and mitochondrial fragments

234 may be explained by a preferential transport and ac-
 235 cumulation of the cations as opposed to the uncharged
 236 isoquinoline molecules. The high membrane poten-
 237 tial in mitochondria may result in a selective attrac-
 238 tion of lipophilic cations, leading to their accumula-
 239 tion on the matrix side (Ramsay and Singer, 1986;
 240 Ramsay et al., 1987; Murphy, 1997). The concentra-
 241 tion of positively charged alkaloids in intact mitochon-
 242 dria may therefore be much higher than the concentra-
 243 tion of the other substances tested in the present
 244 work.

245 The presence of a quaternary atom is not enough
 246 to confer inhibitory activity to molecules, since am-
 247 monium acetate, tetramethylammonium iodide and
 248 tetrapropylammonium iodide had no effect on en-
 249 zyme activity (results not shown). Phenanthrene, with
 250 a full aromatic structure and no substituents, caused
 251 a decrease on NADH dehydrogenase activity (Fig. 9).
 252 NADH dehydrogenase inhibition may be associated
 253 with the presence of at least two adjacent aromatic
 254 rings, which are present in berberine, coptisine, chel-
 255 erythrine and sanguinarine structures (Figs. 6 and 8).
 256 Inhibition by protopine and allocryptopine is likely
 257 due to the carbonyl group, which may react with
 258 catalytically important SH groups in the enzyme
 259 molecule or perhaps with the iron–sulfur clusters of
 260 complex I.

261 The presence of four consecutive aromatic groups
 262 and a positive charge, which exist in chelerythrine and
 263 sanguinarine, may be a structure associated with the
 264 inhibition of succinate dehydrogenase. The positive
 265 charge is probably necessary, since phenanthrene, with
 266 the same aromatic rings but with no charge, did not
 267 inhibit this enzyme. Many observed biological effects
 268 of these two alkaloids involve the formation of a labile
 269 covalent bond between SH groups of cell components
 270 and the electrophilic C₆ carbon (Sedo et al., 2002). The
 271 imminium bond in sanguinarine and chelerythrine is
 272 susceptible to a nucleophilic attack and consequently
 273 plays a key role in the inhibition of SH proteins. The
 274 fact that hepatocytes incubated with these two alka-
 275 loids suffered a dose-dependent GSH depletion cor-
 276 roborates the idea that they bind to this SH peptide
 277 (Ulrichová et al., 2001).

278 The presence of methoxy groups also contributes
 279 to the difference in the inhibition strength of malate–
 280 glutamate-dependent oxygen uptake at low alkaloid
 281 concentrations between the positively charged alka-

282 loids which contain methoxy groups and those where
283 they are absent (chelerythrine versus sanguinarine
284 and berberine versus coptisine, Figs. 2 and 4). This
285 may be due to an easier passage of these alkaloids
286 across the membrane and/or to an increased inhibi-
287 tion of NADH dehydrogenase, in the case of ber-
288 berine.

289 Berberine, containing both a quaternary nitrogen
290 atom and methoxy groups, was the most biologically
291 active of all the alkaloids tested, and therefore it should
292 have the highest toxicity.

293 We suggest that the biological effects of the alka-
294 loids on mitochondria are due to (i) the positive charge
295 of the alkaloids, which causes their accumulation in-
296 side the organelle and (ii) inhibition of both NADH
297 and/or succinate dehydrogenase activity and probably
298 also inhibition at the cytochrome level, since in some
299 cases the effects on respiration are not fully explained
300 by the effects on the enzymes. This is corroborated by
301 preliminary results from our laboratory (unpublished
302 data) which show that berberine inhibits cytochrome
303 a_3 reduction.

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