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# Rapid purification of GST-tagged proteins from large sample volumes

*Lars Haneskog, Anna Heijbel, and Hans J. Johansson, GE Healthcare, Uppsala, Sweden*

*Johan Öhman and Eva Rupp-Thuresson, Bivitrum, Stockholm, Sweden*

## Introduction

The expression of recombinant proteins or domains fused to Glutathione S-transferase (GST) using the pGEX vectors allows for easy purification by affinity chromatography on Glutathione Sepharose™ under mild conditions. The GST-tag can be removed by a site-specific protease either on the column before elution, or after elution. We have developed a chromatography medium, Glutathione Sepharose 4 Fast Flow, for purification of GST-tagged proteins. It has high binding capacity for GST (10 mg/ml medium), and high rigidity makes the medium suitable for large-scale chromatography.

A GST-tagged protein was purified and cleaved by protease on a GSTrap™ FF 5-ml prepacked column to obtain a pure protein without the GST-tag. A second GST-tagged protein, expressed at a low level, was rapidly purified on a 34-ml column by application of a large sample volume at a high flow rate. The high volumetric flow rate allowed preparation to be done four times faster than before.

## Summary and conclusions

- One-step purification on GSTrap FF was used to obtain a highly pure SH2 domain. SH2 was expressed as a GST-tagged protein and purified with on-column proteolytic removal of the GST-tag.
- Glutathione Sepharose 4 Fast Flow was used for rapid purification of a GST-tagged glycoprotein (expressed at a low level) by the application of a large sample volume to the column. This procedure offers a realistic alternative to the need to obtain higher expression levels by the optimization of the fermentation process or the preparation of a new gene construct.



## Materials and methods

### Samples

1. Clarified homogenate of *E. coli* containing the SH2 domain of a phosphatase fused with GST (SH2-GST) ( $M_r$  37 000).
2. Clarified medium from a culture of Human Embryo Kidney cells (HEK293) expressing a  $M_r$  120 000 glycosylated and secreted protein. Preliminary experiments revealed expression levels of 0.5 to 1.5  $\mu$ g GST-tagged protein per ml of culture medium.

### Chromatography

Chromatography was done at room temperature on Glutathione Sepharose 4 Fast Flow using ÄKTAexplorer™ 10 and ÄKTAexplorer 100. GSTrap FF 1-ml and GSTrap FF 5-ml prepacked columns were used for purification and on-column cleavage of SH2-GST.

A 34-ml Glutathione Sepharose 4 Fast Flow medium bed (1.6 x 17 cm) was packed in a XK 16/20 column and used for purification of the low-expressed eukaryotic protein.

### On-column cleavage with protease

After sample application and wash, the GSTrap FF 5-ml column was disconnected from the ÄKTAexplorer and filled using a syringe with 7 ml of 20 U/ml thrombin protease from GE Healthcare in binding buffer. The column was reconnected and left overnight (14 hours) at room temperature before elution.

### Mass spectrometry analysis

A desalted sample of purified SH2 domain was adjusted to 50% acetonitrile/0.5% trifluoroacetic acid, before mixing with saturated sinapinic acid in 50% acetonitrile/0.5% trifluoroacetic acid, and air drying. Mass spectrometry analyses were performed in linear  $m/z$  window on a MALDI-TOF-MS instrument.

## Results

### Purification and on-column cleavage of an SH2-GST fusion protein

Chromatography of 2 ml of clarified *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*) homogenate on GSTrap FF 1-ml, for estimation of expression level, yielded about 2 mg of SH2-GST fusion protein (Fig 1A). The eluted material mostly contained SH2-GST, although a small amount of GST was detected (Fig 1B). No detectable contaminants were recovered.

Column: GSTrap FF, 1 ml  
Sample: 2 ml clarified *E. coli* homogenate expressing a  $M_r$  37 000 SH2-GST fusion protein  
Binding buffer: 150 mM NaCl, 20 mM phosphate buffer, pH 7.3  
Elution buffer: 20 mM reduced glutathione, 50 mM Tris-HCl, pH 8.0  
Flow rate: 2 ml/min (sample application and washing) and 0.5 ml/min (elution)  
System: ÄKTAexplorer 10

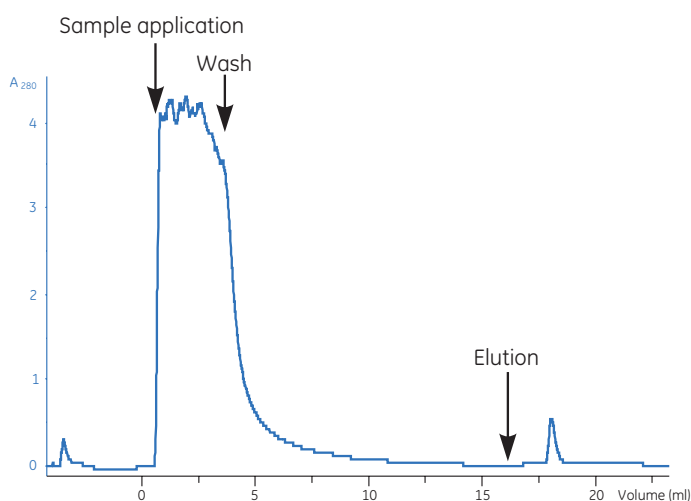


Fig 1A. Purification of SH2 phosphatase domain-GST fusion protein.

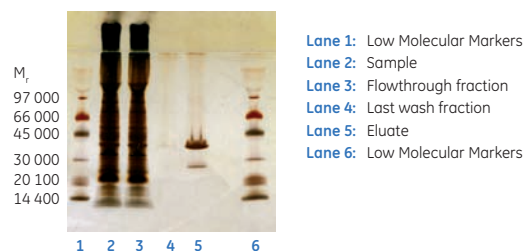
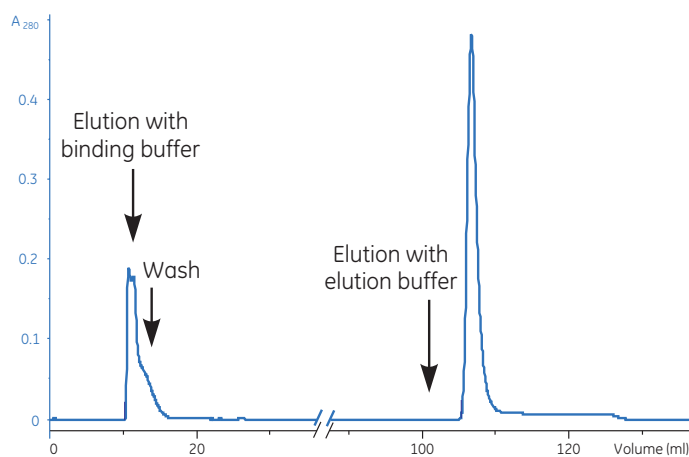
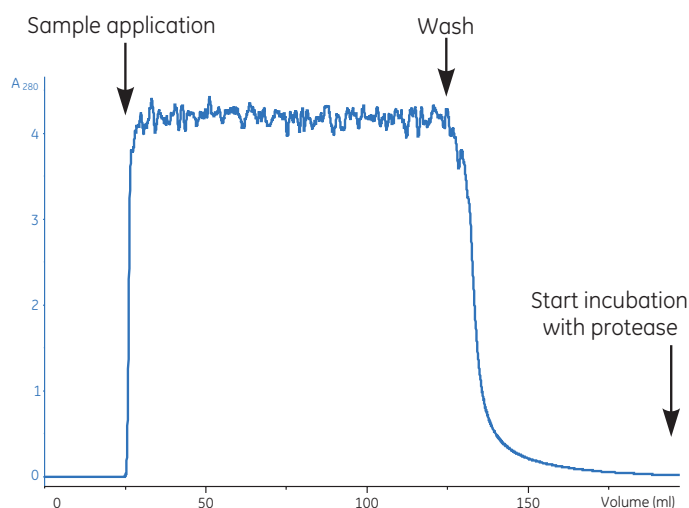


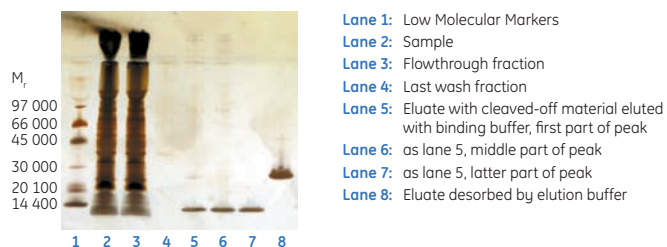
Fig 1B. SDS-PAGE analysis on PhastGel™ Gradient 8–25, silver staining.

To obtain the pure SH2 domain without its GST-tag, chromatography was scaled-up on GSTrap FF 5 ml, and on-column cleavage was done overnight with thrombin before elution of released SH2 domain with binding buffer (Fig 2A). The eluted SH2 domain fraction contained 2 mg of protein and the GST fraction eluted by glutathione contained 4 mg. SDS-PAGE indicated that the prepared SH2 domain was pure and that the protease cleavage was complete (Fig 2B). Mass spectrometry revealed essentially two peaks corresponding to the single-charged ( $m/z$  12 472) and double-charged protein ( $m/z$  6 241), which agrees with the expected  $M_r$  of the SH2 domain (Fig 3). The spectra contained no other peaks in the  $m/z$  window used (insert in Fig 3).

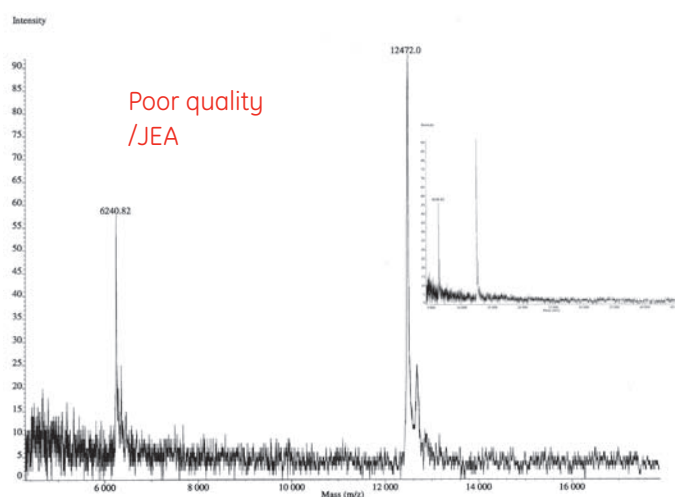
**Column:** GSTrap FF, 5 ml  
**Sample:** 100 ml clarified *E. coli* homogenate expressing a  $M_r$  37 000 SH2-GST fusion protein  
**Binding buffer:** 150 mM NaCl, 20 mM phosphate buffer, pH 7.3  
**Elution buffer:** 10 mM reduced glutathione, 50 mM Tris-HCl, pH 8.0  
**Protease treatment:** 20 U/ml thrombin protease (GE Healthcare) for 14 hours at room temperature  
**Flow rate:** 10 ml/min (sample application and washing) and 2.5 ml/min (elution)  
**System:** ÄKTAexplorer 10



**Fig 2A.** Purification of SH2 domain with concomitant removal of the GST-tag.



**Fig 2B.** SDS-PAGE analysis on PhastGel Gradient 8-25, silver staining.

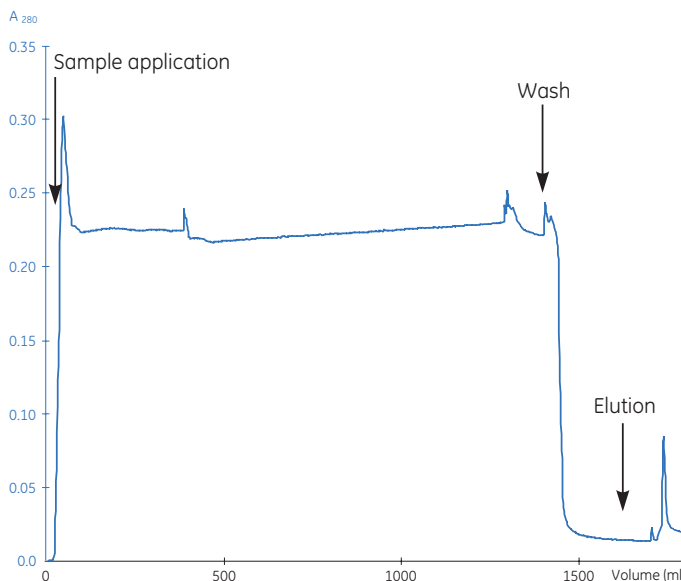


**Fig 3.** MALDI-TOF-MS analysis of the SH2 domain.

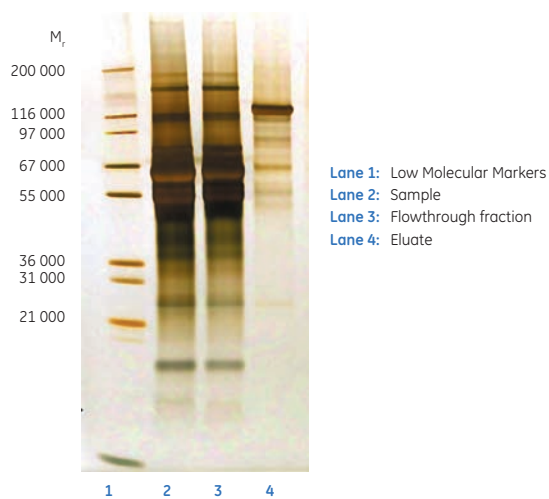
### Purification of a eukaryotic GST-tagged protein for crystallography

A large volume (1.5 liters) of clarified cell culture medium from HEK293 cells expressing small amounts of a  $M_r$  120 000 glycosylated and secreted protein was applied to a 34-ml Glutathione Sepharose 4 Fast Flow column. The column was washed with binding buffer and 1 mg of pure protein was eluted by a step-gradient of glutathione (Fig 4), all within five hours. The protein was concentrated by ultrafiltration (cut-off  $M_r$  10 000) and used for successful crystallization trials (Fig 5).

**Column:** 1.6 x 17 cm Glutathione Sepharose 4 Fast Flow (34 ml) packed in XK 16/20 column  
**Sample:** 1500 ml clarified cell culture medium HEK293 expressing a  $M_r$  120 000 glycosylated and secreted protein  
**Binding buffer:** 140 mM NaCl, 2.7 mM KCl, 10 mM  $\text{Na}_2\text{HPO}_4$ , 1.8 mM  $\text{KH}_2\text{PO}_4$ , pH 7.3  
**Elution buffer:** 20 mM reduced glutathione, 50 mM NaCl, 50 mM Tris-HCl, pH 8.0  
**Flow rate:** 10 ml/min (sample application and washing) and 1 ml/min (elution)  
**System:** ÄKTAexplorer 100



**Fig 4A.** Purification of low-expressed eukaryotic protein.



**Fig 4B.** SDS-PAGE analysis on 4% to 12% gel followed by silver staining.



**Fig 5.** Crystals of the eukaryotic GST-tagged protein obtained in the initial crystallization trial.

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GE Healthcare Bio-Sciences AB

Björkgatan 30

751 84 Uppsala

Sweden

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GE Healthcare Bio-Sciences AB, a General Electric Company.

GE Healthcare Europe GmbH  
Munzinger Strasse 5, D-79111 Freiburg, Germany

GE Healthcare UK Ltd  
Amersham Place, Little Chalfont, Buckinghamshire, HP7 9NA, UK

GE Healthcare Bio-Sciences Corp  
800 Centennial Avenue, P.O. Box 1327, Piscataway, NJ 08855-1327, USA

GE Healthcare Bio-Sciences KK  
Sanken Bldg. 3-25-1, Hyakunincho, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo 169-0073, Japan

Asia Pacific Tel +85 65 62751830 Fax +85 65 62751829 • Australasia Tel +61 2 8820 8299 Fax +61 2 8820 8200 • Austria Tel 01/57606 1613 Fax 01/57606 1614 • Belgium Tel 0800 73 890 Fax 02 416 8206 • Canada Tel 1 800 463 5800 Fax 1 800 567 1008 • Central & East Europe Tel +43 1 972 720 Fax +43 1 972 722 750 • Denmark Tel +45 70 25 24 50 Fax +45 45 16 2424 • Eire Tel 1 800 709992 Fax +44 1494 542010 • Finland & Baltics Tel +358 9 512 3940 Fax +358 9 512 39439 • France Tel 01 69 35 67 00 Fax 01 69 41 98 77 • Germany Tel 0800 9080 711 Fax 0800 9080 712 • Greater China Tel +852 2100 6300 Fax +852 2100 6338 • Italy Tel 02 26001 320 Fax 02 26001 399 • Japan Tel 81 3 5331 9336 Fax 81 3 5331 9370 • Korea Tel 82 2 6201 3700 Fax 82 2 6201 3803 • Latin America Tel +55 11 3933 7300 Fax +55 11 3933 7304 • Middle East & Africa Tel +30 210 96 00 687 Fax +30 210 96 00 693 • Netherlands Tel 0800-82 82 82 1 Fax 0800-82 82 82 4 • Norway Tel +47 815 65 777 Fax +47 815 65 666 • Portugal Tel 21 417 7035 Fax 21 417 3184 • Russia, CIS & NIS Tel +7 495 956 5177 Fax +7 495 956 5176 • Spain Tel 902 11 72 65 Fax 935 94 49 65 • Sweden Tel 018 612 1900 Fax 018 612 1910 • Switzerland Tel 0848 8028 10 Fax 0848 8028 11 • UK Tel 0800 515 313 Fax 0800 616 927 • USA Tel +1 800 526 3593 Fax +1 877 295 8102



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