

## Multiple Electron Ejection from Proteins Resulting from Single-Photon Excitation in the Valence Shell

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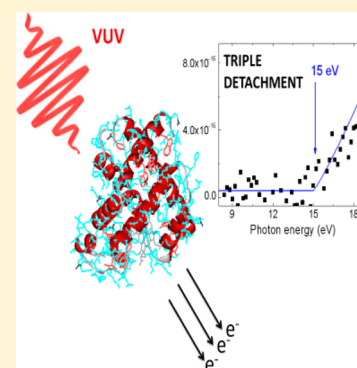
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### S Supporting Information

**ABSTRACT:** One-photon multiple ionization is a signature of dynamical electron correlations in atoms and small molecules, as observed in the Auger process when Auger electron emission follows core-shell ionization. In such a process, the high energy needed to remove several electrons is due to the strong Coulombic attraction between the last departing electron(s) and the ionic core. Multiply negatively charged molecules offer the possibility to overcome the Coulombic attraction, opening the way for multielectron photodetachment following valence shell excitation. Here photodetachment studies have been performed on electrosprayed protein polyanions using vacuum ultraviolet synchrotron radiation coupled to a radiofrequency ion trap. Double, triple, and quadruple electron emissions from protein polyanions resulting from single-photon excitation in the valence shell were observed with ionization thresholds below 20 eV photon energy. This suggests the existence of large electronic correlations in proteins between weakly bound electrons standing on distant sites. Besides, the resulting multiradical polyanions appear to be remarkably stable, an important issue in radiobiology.

**SECTION:** Spectroscopy, Photochemistry, and Excited States



Electron correlations play an essential role in a wide range of fundamentally important many-body phenomena in modern physics and chemistry. The advent of short pulses from the vacuum ultraviolet (VUV) up to the extreme ultraviolet (XUV) wavelength range reinforced this area of research with new perspectives for the observation of the correlated electron dynamics in one of its striking evidence: multi-ionization of atoms and molecules.<sup>1,2</sup> Double ionization of neutral atoms and molecules following either inner-shell excitation with X-ray light or via a direct valence-shell process is now a well-documented mechanism.<sup>3,4</sup> Mass spectrometry and various electron/electron and ion/ion coincidence techniques, coupled to the synchrotron radiation (SR) have been used for the study of inner-shell triple photoionization on lithium,<sup>5</sup> rare gas atoms,<sup>4,6</sup> and small molecules.<sup>7–9</sup>

When the initial targets are negatively charged ions, the ejection of one electron after light excitation is referred to as photodetachment, a process that requires little energy (less than a few electronvolts) due to the weak Coulomb attraction experienced by the outgoing electron. In the past, this process has been widely studied on small atomic and molecular systems in the visible and near-UV using lasers. Also, inner-shell double, triple, and quadruple photodetachment has been recently reported for atomic Ru anion using merged beams techniques at synchrotron radiation facilities.<sup>10</sup>

Developments on electrospray ionization sources have made possible the study of photodetachment from biomolecular polyanions (protein, peptides, nucleic acids, etc.) using tunable UV lasers.<sup>11,12</sup> However, very few studies have been performed using VUV for electron photodetachment from negatively charged ions. These include our recent report on the photodetachment spectroscopy of closed and open shells protein anions in the VUV.<sup>13</sup> In particular, we evidenced a double-electron detachment (with a threshold at 11.4 eV) in the case of the multiply deprotonated (5– charge state) insulin protein anions.<sup>14</sup>

In this work, we aim at exploring for the first time the possibility of valence-shell direct triple and quadruple photodetachment on various protein polyanions, resulting from single-photon excitation in the valence shell. To get some insights into the mechanisms leading to multiple electron emission, we also document threshold values for valence-shell double detachment on a large array of proteins of different sizes and holding different charge states.

The experimental setup is based on a linear ion-trap mass spectrometer<sup>15</sup> coupled to the DESIRS VUV beamline<sup>16</sup> of the

Received: March 10, 2014

Accepted: April 24, 2014

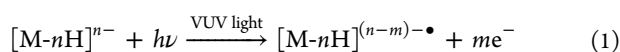
Published: April 24, 2014

Table 1. Molecular Weight and Charge State of Proteins Studied in This Work<sup>a</sup>

protein name	molecular weight (Da)	charge state	adiabatic electron affinities (eV) (from ref 18)	threshold (eV) double	triple	quadruple
insulin	5 808	5-		11.4 ± 0.1 (from ref 14)		
cytochrome <i>c</i>	12 384	7-	0.90 ± 0.2	11.4 ± 0.25		
		8-	0.95 ± 0.2	11.4 ± 0.25		
		9-	1.0 ± 0.2	11.5 ± 0.1		
		10-	0.95 ± 0.2	11.6 ± 0.25		
		11-	0.5 ± 0.2	12.0 ± 0.1		
		12-	0.15 ± 0.2	12.0 ± 0.25		
myoglobin	16 951	9-		12.2 ± 0.25	15 ± 0.25	
BSA	66 430	33-		12.2 ± 0.3	14.8 ± 0.3	18.2 ± 0.3

<sup>a</sup>Adiabatic electron energies and thresholds for double, triple, and quadruple photodetachment are given.

SOLEIL synchrotron radiation facility (France). After irradiation of selected  $[M-nH]^{n-}$  anions,  $[M-nH]^{(n-m)-\bullet}$  ions resulting from the emission of *m* electrons are detected. As we have already observed in the case of insulin,<sup>14</sup> one-photon multi-ionization process (eq 1) is in competition with multiphoton processes due to sequential absorption of multiple photons.

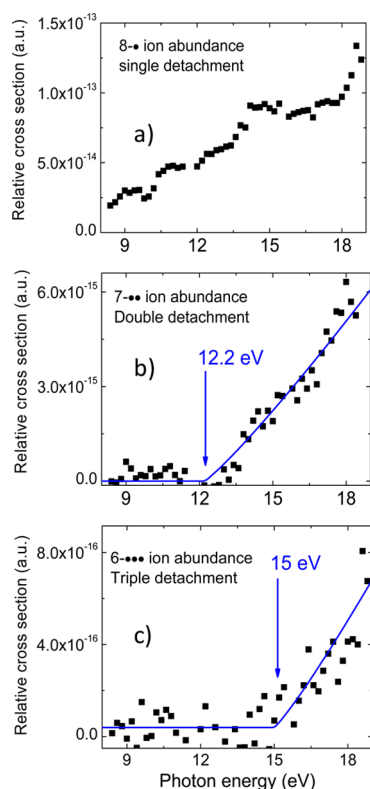


Indeed, for long irradiation times (several hundreds of milliseconds) of the trapped ions, the protein can sequentially eject several electrons by a multistep mechanism, in which the product ion from single photodetachment  $[M-nH]^{(n-1)-\bullet}$  is stored long enough to reabsorb another photon and then lose an additional electron, leading to  $[M-nH]^{(n-2)-\bullet\bullet}$  and so on. Competition between these two mechanisms is exemplified here for the case of double-electron detachment from cytochrome *c*  $[M-11H]^{11-}$ , a protein comprising a sequence of 104 amino acid residues. To disentangle both mechanisms, we have monitored the ion abundance of the  $[M-11H]^{9-\bullet\bullet}$  ion of cytochrome *c* as a function of the irradiation time at 9.5 and 15 eV photon energy, as shown in Figure S1b,c in the Supporting Information, respectively. It appears that at 9 eV photon energy (Figure S1b in the Supporting Information), a nearly zero intensity accounting for the vanishing nonzero background is observed for irradiation time shorter than 100 ms, with an overall pure quadratic dependence with the irradiation duration. This clearly indicates that observation of double photodetachment at 9 eV comes from a sequential two-photon two-step mechanism. In contrast, at 15 eV, for low irradiation duration (i.e., up to ~80 ms), the data are adequately fitted by a linear function. In this range, the one-photon process is dominant. At longer irradiation time, the trend becomes nonlinear, and the sequential two-photon mechanism is favored. Therefore, in the following, the relative cross sections obtained for protein polyanions have been acquired at 90 ms irradiation time, corresponding mainly to the linear regime. Hence, for 90 ms irradiation time, the double-photodetachment relative cross section of  $[M-11H]^{9-\bullet\bullet}$  ion of cytochrome *c* shown in Figure S1a in the Supporting Information may entirely be ascribed to a valence double photodetachment. A clear onset is observed at 12 eV, as derived from a threshold linear Wannier-type fitting.<sup>17</sup> The Wannier fitting is used here only as a convenient mean of extracting the threshold value without physical assumption of the underlying physics.

As reported in Table 1, thresholds for the double photodetachment are very similar for all protein polyanions. They slightly increase with the size of the protein (from 11.4 eV

for insulin to 12.2 eV for larger proteins like myoglobin and BSA). However, the electron density in the studied polyanions is different and decreases when the size of the protein increases (5 charges for 5810 Da for insulin vs 33 charges for 66420 Da for BSA). This slight increase in the thresholds for the double photodetachment might be correlated with the slight decrease in the electron density in the protein polyanion. Interestingly, for a given protein (cytochrome *c*), the thresholds for the double photodetachment are found to be little dependent on the charge state (they range from 11.4 eV for 7- to 12 eV for 12-; see Table 1). The adiabatic electron affinities (AEAs) of the cytochrome *c* (CytoC) protein have been experimentally determined by Vonderach et al.<sup>18</sup> and are roughly constant from 6- to 10- charge states and then slightly decrease from 10- to 12- charge states. This is due to the fact that the additional charges in protein polyanions can be easily accommodated by a partial unfolding of the CytoC. This partial unfolding prevents a significant increase in the coulomb repulsion as observed with the adiabatic electron affinities and may also explain the almost constant value for double-detachment threshold. Partial unfolding already occurs for charge state 12- (see ref 18), which is an indication that the conformation of the protein is a not a key factor for the multiple-detachment process.

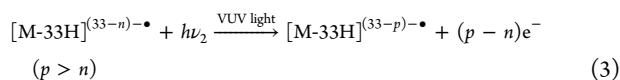
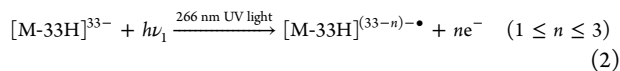
One objective of this work is to explore the possibility to photodetach more than two electrons with a one-photon VUV valence shell excitation. While cytochrome *c* only leads to double detachment after VUV photon irradiation in the explored energy range, larger proteins, such as myoglobin and bovine serum albumin (BSA, 66.4 kDa), allow for valence shell triple photodetachment. As an illustration, the single, double, and triple photodetachment relative cross sections of myoglobin  $[M-9H]^{9-}$  ion (i.e., leading to  $[M-9H]^{8-\bullet}$ ,  $[M-9H]^{7-\bullet\bullet}$ ,  $[M-9H]^{6-\bullet\bullet\bullet}$ , respectively) in the 8 to 19 eV range are reported in Figure 1. For the single detachment yield, whose threshold is located well below 8 eV, a monotonic increase in detachment yield from 8 to 19 eV with superimposed structures is visible, as already observed for photodetachment yields of other protein polyanions.<sup>13</sup> For double and triple photodetachment relative cross sections, sharp thresholds are clearly visible and were determined at 12.2 and 15 eV. (See Figure 1b,c.) The detachment yields as a function of irradiation time show that the double and triple photodetachment relative cross section (for 90 ms of irradiation time) may entirely be ascribed to a valence-shell double and triple photodetachment. (See Figure S2 in the Supporting Information.) In our work, the two- (three-) electron process has a yield ~50 (~200) times lower than the one observed for single electron ejection (as reported in Figure 1), as it can be seen in Figure 2a (whose vertical axis



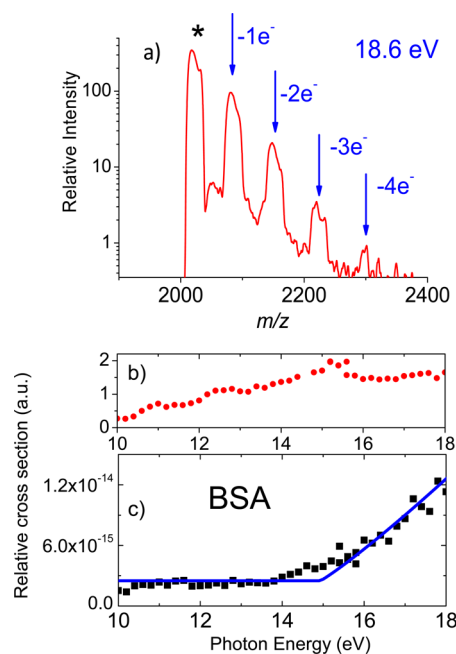
**Figure 1.** Relative cross section for 90 ms irradiation duration for (a) single, (b) double, and (c) triple photodetachment for the 9- charge state of myoglobin protein anions. The solid line is a Wannier-type linear fit to the data.

is logarithmic not linear). In organic molecules, the ratio of single to double ionization has been reported to be  $\sim 2\%$ ,<sup>19</sup> which is of the same magnitude as our findings in the case of photodetachment. Similarly, for BSA protein polyanions ( $33^-$  charge state), thresholds at 12.2 and 14.8 eV were obtained for double and triple photodetachments. (See Table 1.) A valence-shell quadruple photodetachment for BSA polyanion ( $33^-$  charge state) was observed (see Figure 2) with a threshold estimated at  $\sim 18.2$  eV.

The crucial issue of sequential absorption of multiple photons versus single-photon process was further examined by measuring the photodetachment yields for the photodetachment of  $[M-33H]^{(33-n)-\bullet}$ -oxidized products of BSA within a complementary two-color scheme experiment combining a UV laser at 266 nm to the VUV light, as we already used in ref 20.



The measured photodetachment yield, corresponding to the process described by eq 3 for the photogenerated  $[M-33H]^{(33-n)-\bullet}$  radicals ( $1 \leq n \leq 3$ ) (produced via eq 2), is compared with that of the corresponding closed-shell species  $[M-33H]^{33-}$  in Figure S3 in the Supporting Information. It shows that oxidized ions have qualitatively very similar absorption yields as their precursor ions. A sequential mechanism due to the absorption of several photons would result in a multiple photodetachment yield equal to the product of the detachment yields recorded for the different steps

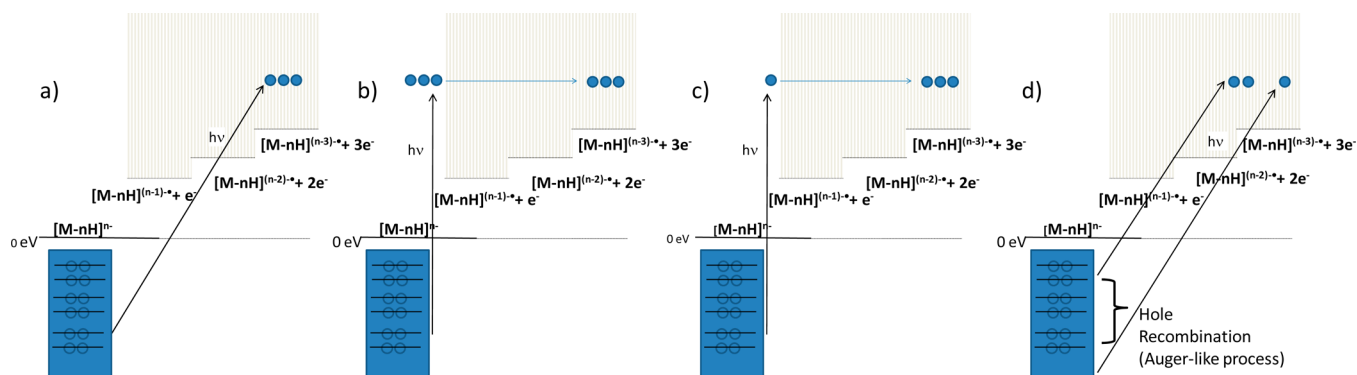


**Figure 2.** (a) Mass spectrum after irradiation with 18.6 eV photons and 90 ms irradiation duration of BSA  $[M-33H]^{33-}$  anion. The asterisk corresponds to the precursor ion ( $[M-33H]^{33-}$ ,  $m/z$  2017). (b) (Red filled circles) Calculated multiple photodetachment yield that would correspond to ionization by sequential absorption of multiple photons. It is equal to the product of the detachment yields recorded for the different steps ( $33^- \rightarrow 32^- \bullet \rightarrow 31^- \bullet \bullet \rightarrow 30^- \bullet \bullet \bullet$ ). The curves used to produce this last curve are shown in Figure S3 in the Supporting Information. (c) (Black filled squares) Relative cross section for 90 ms irradiation duration for triple photodetachment for the  $33^-$  charge state of BSA protein anions. The solid line is a Wannier-type linear fit to the data.

(Figure 2b) for BSA. The calculated yield corresponding to this sequential absorption of multiple photons is compared in Figure 2 with the experimental yield of the BSA charge state  $30^-$ , as produced by a one-VUV photon triple detachment, from  $33^-$  BSA ions. The clear discrepancy between the two curves confirms, beyond irradiation time dependences, the existence of a multiple detachment due to the absorption of a single VUV photon.

To eject  $n$  electrons, the photon energy has to be higher than the binding energies of the  $n$  electrons of the precursor protein ion. Because the process involves polyanions (for both precursors and products), the deposited energy also has to be allowed to overcome the Coulombic barrier, which results from repulsive interaction between negative charges.<sup>21</sup> Possibly, the Coulomb barrier for such simultaneous emission of two (or more) electrons may be significantly lower than the barrier for the emission of just one electron, as it was demonstrated for the two-electron emission after photoexcitation of metal-cluster dianions.<sup>22</sup> This may explain the relative efficiency of multiple detachment in polyanions and the possibility to disentangle it from multistep mechanisms.

Several processes might account for such a multidetachment after single-photon excitation in the valence shell. A knockout process has been proposed by several authors to account for double photoionization in atoms and rather small molecules.<sup>19,23</sup> In this process, an emitted electron transfers part of its kinetic energy to another electron, resulting in the emission of an additional electron. It involves electron-



**Figure 3.** Proposed mechanisms for multi-photo-detachment, exemplified in the case of triple detachment: (a) concerted direct three electron emission, (b) multielectron resonant excitation followed by emission of three electrons, and (c) single electron excitation leading to emission of three electrons. (d) Single electron ionization leading to formation of a hole. Via an Auger-like process, hole recombination leads to the ejection of additional electrons.

electron collisions whose cross sections are expected to be low in proteins, owing to the large distances between the negative charges spread over the whole protein skeleton on acidic sites, leading to small collision solid angles between the charges. This would lead to a particularly nonefficient process for the triple and quadruple electron losses. As an example, we have calculated the electron–electron distance distribution in the myoglobin protein (9– charge state), assuming a native structure. Both electron interdistance between (i) two negative charges (held by carboxylate groups) and between (ii) a charge on a carboxylate group and electron from aromatic rings. Data are reported in Figure S4 in Supporting Information. Electron interdistances from two negative charges range from 10 to 45 Å, with an average value around 30 Å. Interestingly, the interdistance between a charge on a carboxylate group and electron from an aromatic ring is shorter with an average value around 24 Å. This may favor electronic couplings between aromatic amino-acid group and carboxylate groups to the detriment of a particle–particle collision scheme such as a “knock-out process”. We may then postulate that multiple photodetachment arises from a one-photon excitation of several electrons. This multielectron excitation process would result either in the concerted emission of several electrons due to direct excitations into the continuum (Figure 3a) or, following the previously described resonant mechanism for single photodetachment,<sup>12</sup> in autoionization after excitation of resonant bound states (Figure 3b). Another possibility would be a one-photon excitation of a single electron resulting in a highly excited state that would then decay via multiple autoionization into the multiple photodetachment continuum (Figure 3c). An electron can be ejected following VUV single-photon absorption. Following this primary event, the ejection of two other electrons may occur through an Auger-like process (Figure 3d). Interestingly, Zubarev and coworkers<sup>24</sup> have evidenced that electron detachment from multiply charged anions could be obtained by interactions with fast electrons (>10 eV). The onset of the polypeptide chain ionization leads to the creation of a positive radical charge (hole). This hole is mobile, with the driving forces for its transfer being the Coulombic attraction to the negative charges as well as the difference in local ionization energies of amino acid residues. Mutual neutralization of the hole and an electron results in electronic excitation that causes backbone bond cleavage. One may speculate that mutual neutralization of the hole and an

electron might induce ejection of low-binding energy electrons, as suggested in mechanisms c and d.

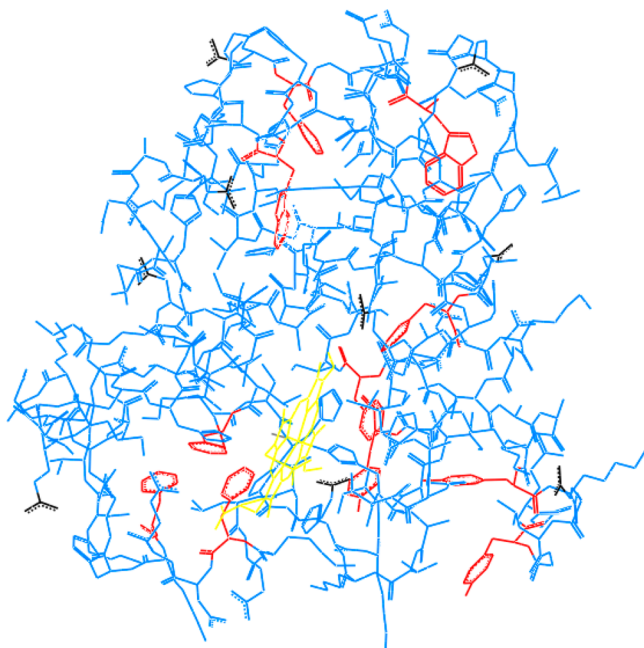
Assuming that 15 eV in a protein like myoglobin (possessing 1569 atoms) is redistributed in all vibrational modes would lead to an increase in temperature of 0.12 K. This increase in temperature is of course not sufficient to induce thermoionic processes. However, it has been shown in clusters (in particular, with the pioneering work of E.E.B. Campbell on fullerenes)<sup>25</sup> that the combination of a high density of vibrational states together with strong rovibronic couplings and a low electron binding energy is particularly favorable for the development of delayed electron emission. Matheis et al.<sup>11</sup> have shown that delayed emission is a competitive process to direct detachment in polypeptides. However, they reported that in the far-UV (213 nm), a dense manifold of excited states of the monoanion becomes accessible (corresponding to remaining  $\pi-\pi^*$  excitations), increasing the direct detachment cross section. We may expect that the direct detachment cross section continues to increase in the VUV range. These considerations permit to rule out the thermionic emission.

Beyond the above mechanistic discussion, another approach for the understanding of the striking results we observed consists of considering the energetic of the multidetachment process. Indeed, phenomenologically, for the  $n$ th photodetachment process in protein polyanions, the array of results that we gathered and which are summarized in Table 1 suggest that an empirical threshold (PD $^n$ ) law could be written as

$$PD^n \cong 8.5 + (n - 1) \times 3.2 \text{ eV} \quad (2 \leq n \leq 4) \quad (4)$$

These PD $^n$  threshold values appear to roughly match the sum of the electron affinity of the carboxylate ( $\sim 3.2$  eV)<sup>26</sup> and the ionization energy of aromatic amino acids ( $\sim 8$  eV).<sup>27,28</sup> Thus, it may be suggested that multielectron emission by photodetachment requires first the energy for ionization of one electron localized onto a peptide bond or a neutral amino acid and then an additional energy for the detachment of extra electrons from carboxylate groups. Equation 4 shows that the detachment mechanism (concerted multielectron process or high-energy excitation of a single electron coupled to multielectron emission, see Figure 3) is only efficient when it involves excitation of an electron from peptide bonds or amino acids (other than low binding electrons on carboxylates). Equation 4 appears to be quite universal, valid for small (insulin) or very large (BSA) proteins and for a huge range of charge state (here from 5 $^-$  to 33 $^-$ ). The multi-photo-detachment is a clear

signature of strong electronic correlations occurring within the protein. Equation 4 suggests a correlation between the carboxylate electrons and the electrons on other chromophores, which are distributed on distant sites, as exemplified for the 9-charge state of myoglobin protein. (See Figure 4.) The evidence of excitations delocalized on the whole protein and its influence on charge and information flows still have to be assessed.



**Figure 4.** Native structure of myoglobin as obtained from X-ray diffraction, taken from the protein database PDB (1MBN). The location of the 9 negative charges (determined through minimization of the Coulomb energy) on the oxygen atoms of carboxylic groups of acidic residues are highlighted in black as well as aromatic groups of aromatic amino acid highlighted in red. The prosthetic heme group is also shown in yellow. This Figure shows that the weakest bond electrons, which are on carboxylate groups localized on distant sites on the protein.

Besides, a striking observation on the recorded mass spectra is the stability of the oxidized protein (exhibiting very little fragmentation) over the time scale of the experiment (up to 10 s), even in the case of multiple photodetachment. Protein oxidized anions are a long-lived species, a feature of great importance in biology, such as in aging. Moreover, multiple photodetachment could be a major process by which VUV irradiation of proteins may lead to the emission of numerous low-energy electrons, possibly leading to specific radiation damages.<sup>39</sup>

Our experimental findings open the way for electron correlation studies in molecules in an unprecedented mass and size domain, that is, on full proteins, with the emission of three and four electrons localized on distant sites, well beyond the atomic or molecular (up to triatomics) cases previously studied. They open a new window for extremely rich basic research, with exploration of quantum effects in bioorganic matter. In particular, the energy correlation between the  $n$  electrons emitted and the exact electronic structure of the ion produced should be studied in detail in the future, ideally by electron spectroscopy, to understand both the dynamics of the process and its implications in terms of structure and stability.

This means understanding how the energy deposited into the system is distributed among the different electronic and nuclear degrees of freedom, which may or may not lead to the fragmentation of the molecule.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The experimental setup is based on a linear ion-trap mass spectrometer (LTQ XL, Thermo Electron, San Jose, CA) coupled to the DESIRS undulator-based beamline<sup>16</sup> of the SOLEIL synchrotron radiation facility (France) to perform action spectroscopy in the VUV range and is described in details in refs 15, 20, 30, and 31. In brief, multiply deprotonated insulin, cytochrome *c* from equine heart, apo-myoglobin, and bovine serum albumin (BSA) proteins (Sigma-Aldrich) were generated from a 50/50 water/acetonitrile (v/v) solution at a concentration of  $\sim 50 \mu\text{M}$  and directly electrosprayed at a flow rate of  $5 \mu\text{L}/\text{min}$  for subsequent analysis in a negative-ion mode. For photoinduced electron detachment experiments, the precursor parent ions were selected and irradiated by the SR for 90 ms by monochromatized VUV photon with typical flux in the  $10^{12}$  to  $10^{13}$  ph/sec range in a 5–20 meV bandwidth. The high harmonics of the undulator that could be transmitted by the grating's diffraction high order were cut off by a Ar-filled gas filter<sup>32</sup> between 8 and 16 eV. After irradiation of selected anions, the mass spectrum is recorded, leading to the observation of charge reduced ions. (See eq 1.) The yield of the ion product is monitored as a function of  $h\nu$ . Repeating this procedure over the photon energy range leads to VUV action spectra that are normalized to the incoming photon flux, as measured by a Si photodiode (IRD, AXUV 100). The two-color scheme (see also ref 20) on oxidized product was achieved by irradiation of the stored ion with the fourth harmonic of a Nd:YAG laser (266 nm), copropagating with the SR, owing to the insertion of a drilled mirror, prior to the photodetachment with the SR.

## ASSOCIATED CONTENT

### Supporting Information

Partial relative cross section in 8–15.2 eV for 90 ms irradiation duration for double photodetachment of cytochrome *c* [M-11H]<sup>11-</sup>. Ion abundances for myoglobin for the double and triple photodetachment product ions at 9.5 and 18.8 eV recorded as a function of the irradiation time. Yields of photodetachment as a function of the SR energy for BSA as a function of the oxidation state. Calculated electron–electron distance distribution in the myoglobin protein (9-charge state). This material is available free of charge via the Internet at <http://pubs.acs.org>.

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### Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

SOLEIL support is acknowledged under project no. 20120093. We are heavily indebted to Jean-François Gil for the ion trap frame design and his help in the alignment process with respect to the DESIRS beamline. We also thank the general technical staff of SOLEIL for running the facility. We also thank Michel Broyer for fruitful discussions and his critical comments on the

manuscript. The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013 grant agreement no. 320659). This work was supported by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique, France, under the project ANR-08-BLAN-0065.

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