

# Combined Approaches to the Synthesis and Study of Glycoproteins

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Carbohydrates constitute a large and diverse class of biopolymers. For a long time the primary role of carbohydrates in biology was viewed as a source of energy or as an integral part of cellular structure. However, over recent decades, it has become clear that the expression of complex carbohydrates in human cells is critical in the development and physiology of living systems (1–4). The mammalian glycome is thought to be complex, due to the inherent structural diversity of carbohydrate molecules (5). Nature uses this abundant repertoire of structures as specific codes in several biological processes such as cellular differentiation (6), regulation of cellular signaling (7), fertilization (8), and immune response (9). Unlike proteins and nucleic acids, glycoprotein biosynthesis is not under genetic control, resulting in heterogeneous mixtures—the so-called glycoforms (2). Complexity is further increased by competing pathways between different processing enzymes and substrates that result in complex, branched structures. Access to pure samples from natural sources is very challenging, despite some exceptions (10). It is also well-established that each component of these glycoforms may have different biological properties (2). Recent developments of recombinant glycosylation systems *in vivo* (11), oligosaccharide synthesis (12–15), site-selective protein glycosylation (16–18), glycoarrays (19, 20), and *in vivo* targeting of glycans (21) are leading to a better understanding of carbohydrate function in nature. However, the field of glycobiology still suffers from the lack of basic tools that fueled advances in genomics and proteomics. This Review focuses on recent advances in the synthesis of complex, biologically relevant carbohydrates, new methods for accessing well-defined glycoproteins and glycolipids, and new tools for analysis of glycosylation patterns and the study of glycan–protein interactions.

**ABSTRACT** Carbohydrates are the basis for many therapeutic and diagnostic strategies, yet the full potential of glycans in medicine has not been realized. The study of the precise role of different carbohydrates, bound to either proteins or lipids, is hampered by difficulties in accessing pure, well-defined glycoconjugates. This Review highlights recent advances in glycobiology with a particular emphasis on oligosaccharide synthesis and conjugation techniques for the construction of homogeneous glycoconjugates. New methods for the study of protein–glycan interactions such as carbohydrate arrays and *in vivo* visualization of glycosylation pattern changes will also be addressed. The development of glycotherapeutics is just beginning, and much remains to be understood about the relationship between glycoconjugate structure and function. The emergence of novel tools will certainly facilitate and expand the use of carbohydrates in therapeutics and diagnostics.

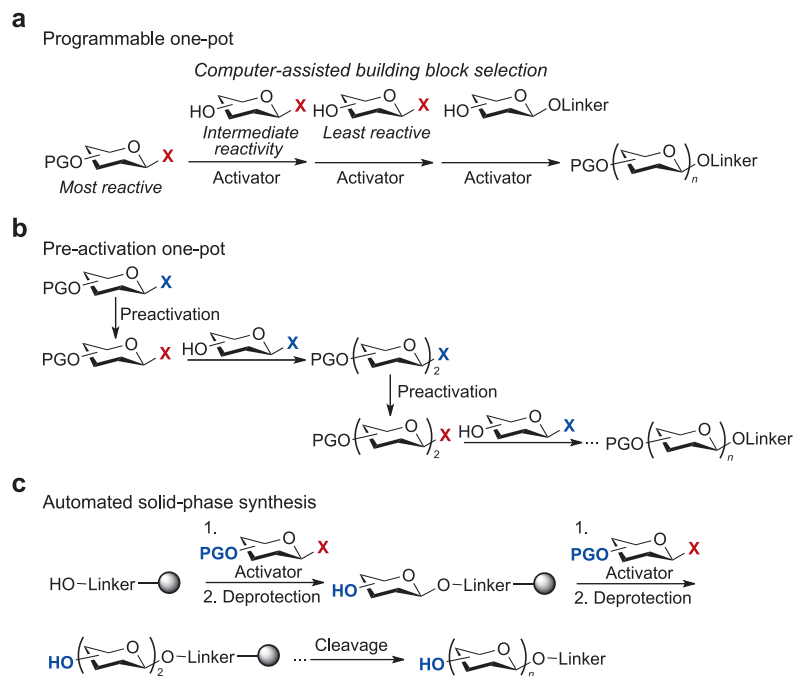
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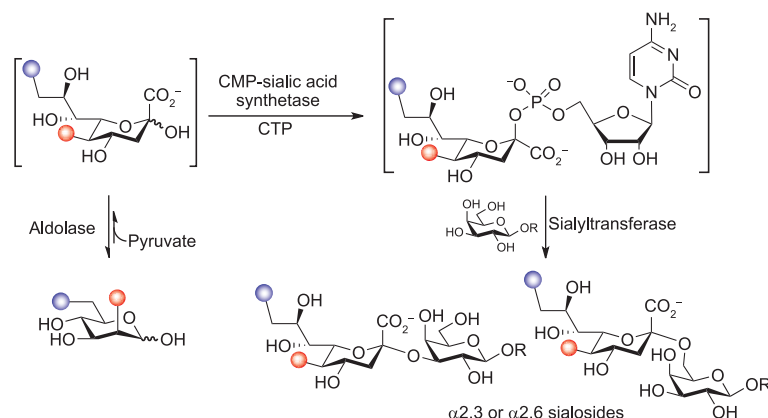
**SCHEME 1. Oligosaccharide synthesis using (a) programmable one-pot synthesis, (b) pre-activation one-pot synthesis, and (c) automated solid-phase synthesis**



**Oligosaccharide Synthesis.** The synthesis of oligosaccharides requires control over the stereochemistry of the glycosidic bond and regioselectivity. Furthermore, the number of glycan structures of interest is very large and thus commands a synthesis method that will allow a large-scale effort to make these glycans available (22). Recent advances in the assembly of oligosaccharides offer an unprecedented level of efficiency. Both chemical and chemoenzymatic synthesis have been improved. One-pot chemical synthesis streamlines the assembly of oligosaccharides (Scheme 1, panel a). The programmable one-pot synthesis relies on computer-assisted selection of building blocks with different activity of the anomeric leaving group based on the sugar and its protecting group pattern (12). This approach allows for the activation of the building block in the presence of the acceptor, which also possesses an anomeric leaving group. Successive addition of building blocks with decreasing reactivity and finally the reducing-end sugar completes the assembly of the protected oligosaccharide. The one-pot method requires one single purifica-

tion step and removes the need for temporary protection of the acceptor alcohol. However, disaccharide building blocks are often needed for the assembly of structures above five residues. Protecting group pattern has to be tailored to the specific position of the monosaccharide in the oligosaccharide and increases the required number of building blocks. Preactivation protocols, where the anomeric leaving group is activated irreversibly, prior to the addition of the acceptor have addressed this shortcoming (Scheme 1, panel b) (23). The resulting disaccharide can be preactivated prior to the addition of the third sugar. Although preactivation introduces more flexibility in the protecting group scheme, the use of disaccharide building blocks is still necessary. The one-pot synthesis of a small library of oligosaccharide has been automated, but solution-phase chemistry will always be challenging to automate (24). A different approach to oligosaccharide assembly is based on automated solid-phase synthesis (Scheme 1, panel c) (13, 25). The method uses the successive glycosylation of a linker attached to a polymeric support

## SCHEME 2. Chemoenzymatic oligosaccharide synthesis using a one-pot, three-enzyme system



with different monosaccharide building blocks. After assembly, the oligosaccharide is cleaved from the polymer support, purified, and deprotected. Automated solid-phase synthesis greatly simplifies the assembly of oligosaccharides and has the potential to make the glycan synthesis available for the nonexpert, as is the case for oligonucleotide and peptide synthesis. This method truly will be useful once all of the common glycosidic linkages are accessible. Thus, the focus of automated solid-phase synthesis has recently shifted to the synthesis of difficult glycosidic linkages such as  $\alpha$ -galactose (26) and  $\beta$ -mannose (27). Different supports such as fluororous linkers have been explored (28) but have yet to deliver on the promise of automation.

Chemoenzymatic synthesis of oligosaccharides is often used as an alternative to existing chemical methods (29–31). The stereo- and regioselective glycosylation of unprotected glycans makes this approach particularly attractive. However, glycosyltransferases are not always available and require the use of expensive nucleotide-activated glycosides. *In vivo* synthesis and multienzyme systems have been used to prepare complex glycans on a large scale (29, 32–36). Recently, the discovery of highly active bacterial sialyltransferases has enabled the synthesis of sialosides in a one-pot, three-enzyme system starting from various mannosamines (Scheme 2) (37, 38). This method was used to generate a library containing natural and unnatural  $\alpha$ 2,3- and  $\alpha$ 2,6-sialosides. The challenge remains to identify other transferases with high activity and broad

substrate specificity in order to gain access to unnatural glycans.

**Carbohydrate Vaccines.** The development of carbohydrate-based vaccines holds great promise for a host of diseases (39). Current strategies require conjugation of the low immunogenic carbohydrate antigen through a linker to a protein carrier for good antibody response (Figure 1). The protein carrier induces a potent T-cell response resulting in a cascade of cytokines that aid the antibody response against the protein carrier. In some cases good levels of carbohydrate-specific antibody were raised using conjugate constructs (40–44).

Despite these successes, serious challenges remain. Strong adjuvants often are required to induce a good immune response. High antibody titers against protein and linker can result in undesired immune suppression

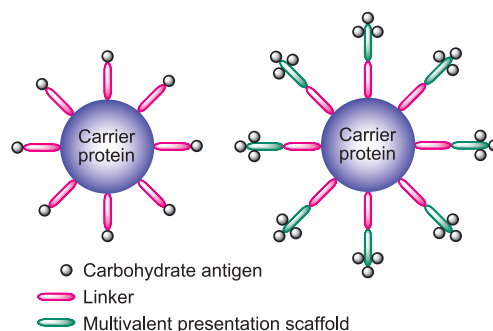


Figure 1. Typical glycoconjugate vaccine constructs.

of the carbohydrate epitope (45, 46). While methods for the efficient synthesis of pure antigenic carbohydrates are available, the construction of well-defined glycoconjugates as vaccines is rare. Methods used for the conjugation of the carbohydrate antigen to a protein carrier generally rely on the alkylation of nucleophilic side chains of lysine and cysteine residues (47). Lack of chemoselectivity generates highly polydisperse mixtures that are the basis for immunological studies. The efficacy of such constructs in generating antibodies cannot be attributed definitely to a single antigen copy number. Mass spectrometry analysis typically reveals a statistical mixture of carbohydrate antigen copies. Recently, a robust immune response was generated using a *single* copy of a carbohydrate epitope coupled to a synthetic peptide (48). This is one of only a few, successful examples of a well-defined glycoconjugate construct used in vaccination (49–51). This result encourages the continued investigation of homogeneous constructs in vaccination studies. A coherent strategy that coordinates both carbohydrate synthesis and conjugation methodology allowing for the construction of uniform protein conjugates is highly desirable. Structure–activity relationships and thus glycoconjugate structure and immunogenicity could be correlated.

**Glycoconjugation Methods.** Recent advances in the site-selective modification of proteins enables the creation of pure, well-defined glycoconjugates to study the role of glycans and for applications such as vaccination (16–18). One approach that has been explored to avoid selectivity issues is to introduce a non-native amino acid that contains a side chain with a bio-orthogonal functionality. Chemical ligation at that specific site gives access to homogeneous modified proteins. Recently, access to dehydroalanine-containing proteins and its use as a Michael acceptor for glycosyl thiols has been demonstrated (Scheme 3, panel a). A novel, efficient oxidative-elimination reaction of cysteine with *O*-mesitylenesulfonylhydroxylamine (MSH) gives access to dehydroalanine (52). Alternatively, incorporation of phenyl selenocysteine into a protein through misacylated tRNAs can be converted to dehydroalanine upon treatment with peroxide (53). In both cases, dehydroalanine proved to be an efficient chemical handle to access glycosylated cysteine derivatives. Previous studies on the desulfurization of a disulfide-linked glycoprotein had enabled the first conversion of cysteine to a thioether linked glycoprotein (54). Access to glycosylated pro-

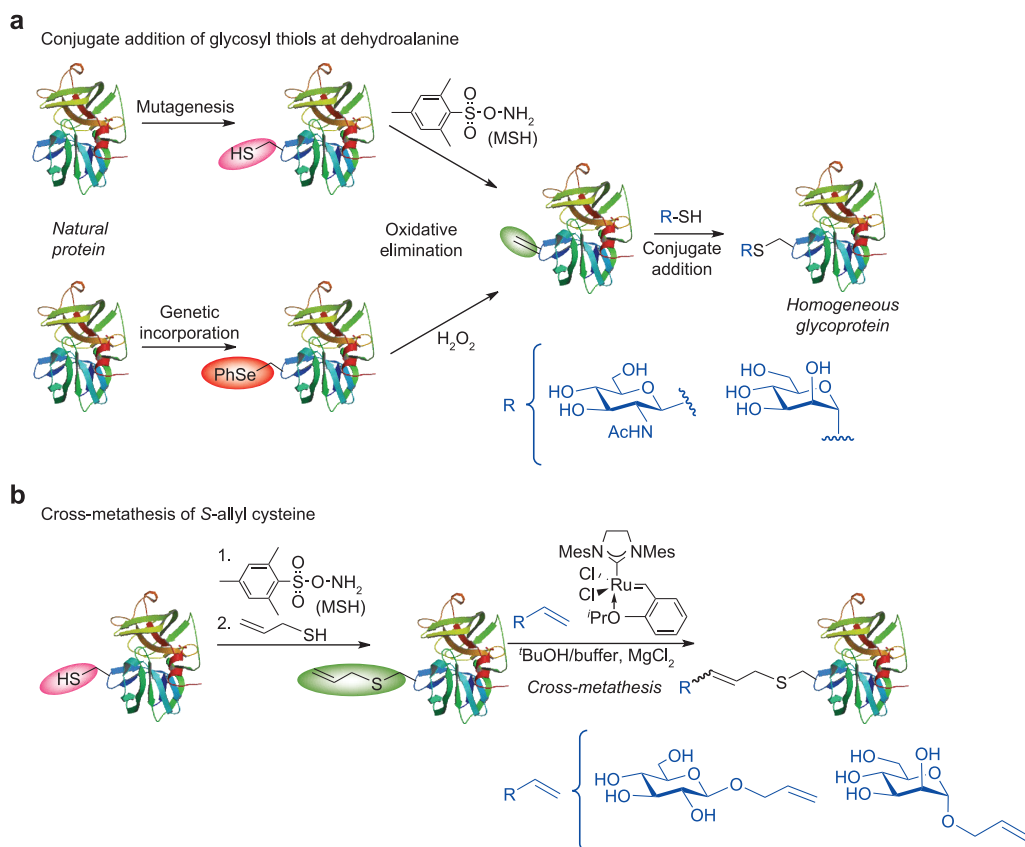
teins was also shown to be possible using olefin metathesis (55). Allyl sulfides are privileged substrates for aqueous cross-metathesis that are easily installed at dehydroalanine, allowing for the conjugation of carbohydrates to proteins (Scheme 3, panel b) (55). This conjugation methodology might prove useful in the development of glycoproteins for vaccination purposes when combined with automated procedures for the synthesis of carbohydrate antigens that often bear a terminal alkene.

Three-dimensional structural investigations of glycoproteins have been hampered by the heterogeneous nature of the available samples. Recently, a new NMR-based method for the study of glycoproteins has been demonstrated (56). Sequential labeling and *in vitro* *N*-glycosylation was used to access a nonlabeled glycan attached to a uniformly labeled protein in milligram amounts. The glycosylation acceptor site as well as the glycan structure of *Campylobacter jejuni* glycoprotein was fully characterized using this strategy.

Chemoenzymatic methods have been successfully employed for the construction of glycoproteins (57). This approach involves preparation of a homogeneous glycoprotein acceptor by either selective deglycosylation of natural or recombinant proteins or by modern chemical protein synthesis techniques. Subsequent stereo- and regiospecific enzyme-catalyzed transglycosylation gives access to complex, well-defined glycoproteins (57). Incorporation of a ketone handle into a protein followed by reaction with a *N*-acetylglucosamine (GlcNAc) derivative containing a hydroxylamine reactive group results in a GlcNAc oxime-linked glycoprotein (58). Sequence-specific and differential enzymatic elaboration at the previously installed GlcNAc site was shown (58). More recently, endo A-catalyzed transglycosylation (59, 60) has been applied to the synthesis of complex glycoproteins (61, 62). Importantly, assembly of the native core *N*-pentasaccharide (Man<sub>3</sub>GlcNAc<sub>2</sub>) and further elaboration is possible using this method (Scheme 4) (62). Combined yeast expression and *in vitro* chemoenzymatic glycosylation was used to assemble human IgG1-Fc (63). These examples illustrate the power of combined chemical and enzymatic methods.

Many proteins are attached to cell surfaces *via* a glycosyl phosphatidylinositol (GPI)-anchor. Native chemical ligation (64) (NCL) was employed to ligate a synthetic, cysteine-tagged GPI anchor with recombinant prion protein (PrP) bearing a C-terminal thioester in the

## SCHEME 3. Chemical site-selective protein glycosylation



first example for homogeneous GPI-anchored PrP (Figure 2) (65). Access to this important class of post-translationally modified proteins provides the basis for a detailed analysis of the influence of GPI anchors on protein structure and function. NCL has often been used for the construction of well-defined glycoproteins (66). For example, the glycoprotein ribonuclease C has been accessed using this strategy (67, 68). Importantly, the semisynthetic enzyme displayed activity comparable to that of natural enzyme.

**Novel Tools for Carbohydrate Research.** Carbohydrates are abundantly displayed on the surface of cells with implications in various physiological and pathological processes (4). The surface of malignant cells displays a characteristic aberrant glycosylation pattern (69). The ability to explore the biological information

content of carbohydrates, attached to either proteins or lipids, has become a primary focus of glycomics research.

### Probing Glycosylation.

Real-time visualization of changes in glycosylation patterns in cells and living animals is now possible (21, 70). Metabolic incorporation of a non-native carbohydrate bearing a bio-orthogonal functional group that acts as a chemical reporter into the cell biosynthetic machinery initiates the process. The modified glycan

### KEYWORDS

#### Automated synthesis of oligosaccharides:

Programmed synthesis of oligosaccharide structures by a machine.

**Bio-orthogonal:** Non-native chemical handle that allows chemical modification without compromising the protein solution or living cell.

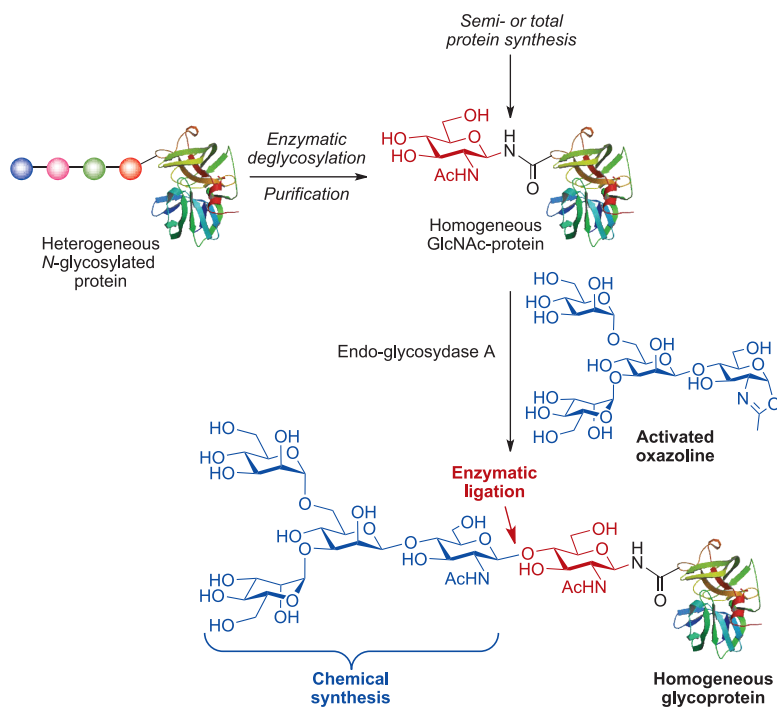
**Chemoenzymatic:** Combined chemical and enzymatic approach toward the synthesis of biomolecules.

**Glycome:** Entirety of glycans associated within an organism.

**Glycoarrays:** Glycans attached to a surface in a spatially defined and miniaturized fashion.

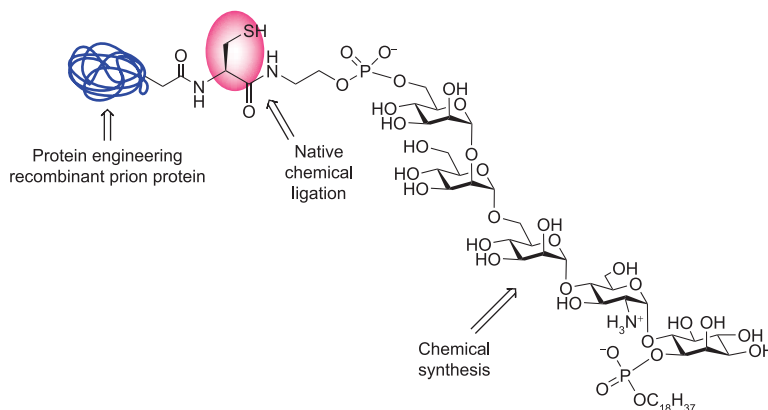
**Glycoform:** Glycosylated proteins that possess the same peptide backbone but different nature and site of glycosylation.

**SCHEME 4. Combined chemical and enzymatic approach for the synthesis of homogeneous *N*-glycoproteins**



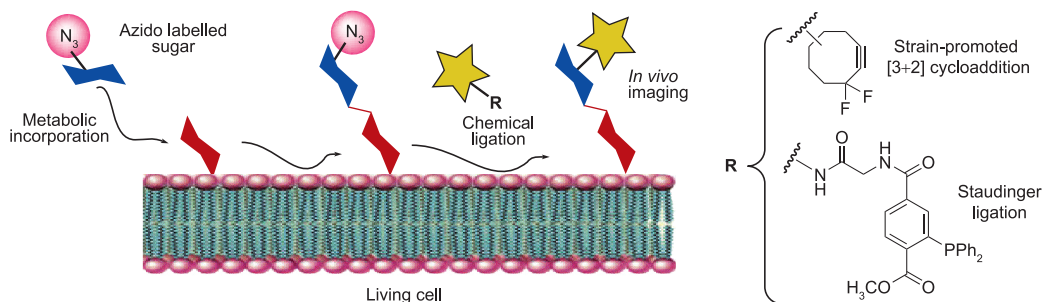
is then processed and incorporated on the cell surface. Subsequent reaction with a detectable probe equipped with a complementary bio-orthogonal functional group enables detection of the incorporated non-native glycan. The chemical reporter is metabolically stable and inert

in biological settings and selectively reacts with phosphines to generate an aza-ylide intermediate that, upon hydrolysis, gives an amine and phosphine oxide—Staudinger ligation (71) and alkynes in a [3 + 2] Cu(I)-promoted cycloaddition resulting in a triazole



**Figure 2. Synthesis of a semisynthetic, homogeneous GPI prion protein (PrP).**





**Figure 3. Schematic view of the use of azido-labeled sugars for carbohydrate imaging in living systems.**

(72, 73). These two reactions are now standard tools in chemical biology, with the Staudinger ligation finding extensive use to probe *in vivo* glycosylation in cells (74, 75), allowing, for example, identification of *O*-GlcNAc proteins (76). More recently, a strain-promoted [3 + 2] cycloaddition between azides and cyclooctyne that does not require cytotoxic copper has been disclosed (Figure 3) (77, 78). This methodology was successfully used for *in vivo* imaging of membrane-associated glycans in developing zebrafish embryos (77). 4-Dibenzocyclooctinols are also efficient reagents in copper-free Huisgen cycloaddition reactions allowing for real-time monitoring of glycan trafficking in living cells (79).

**Carbohydrate Arrays.** System-wide analysis techniques such as DNA and protein arrays have benefited genomics and proteomics. Glycobiology lacked routine tools for glycan profiling until carbohydrate arrays emerged as the high-throughput analytical technique of choice for the study of glycan–protein interactions, starting in 2003 (80, 81). Chip-based glycan arrays enable screening of several thousand binding events in a single read-out. Importantly, this technique requires very little glycan sample. The presence of a linker between the glass surface and the sugar ensures presentation of the glycan to the binding partner. The diverse display of glycans on a single chip mimics glycan presentation on cells allowing multivalent interactions of relatively weak protein–glycan interactions. These interactions are generally detected by the use of fluorophore-labeled proteins or by antibody incubation (19, 20). Surface plasmon resonance (SPR) allows for label-free analysis of protein–carbohydrate interactions on microarrays (82).

Carbohydrate arrays rapidly became the tool of choice for the study of glycans in systems biology (83). Carbohydrate arrays have found most use in the efficient screening of carbohydrate-binding proteins (19, 20). Focused carbohydrate microarrays complement the Consortium for Functional Glycomics (USA) general carbohydrate array. These include, for instance, host specificity of avian and human influenza strains (84) or epitope mapping of HIV- and tumor-associated antibodies (85–87). Heparin microarrays aided the identification of specific sequences recognized by different fibroblast growth factors (88), and serologic search for autoimmune disease antibodies led to the discovery of novel Crohn’s disease markers (89). Immobilization of sulfated chondroitin tetrasaccharides led to the identification of novel tumor necrosis factor- $\alpha$  antagonist (90). Enzymatic elaboration of immobilized glycans is also possible (91). Additionally, kinetic constants can be calculated from binding intensities at different dilutions (92, 93). More recently, covalently immobilized synthetic GPI glycans were used to assess the level and specificity of anti-GPI antibodies in individuals exposed to malaria disease and naïve individuals (Figure 4) (94). Additionally, phosphatidylinositol mannosides (PIMs)—essential precursors of more complex mycobacterial cell wall glycolipids—have been synthesized and immobilized in

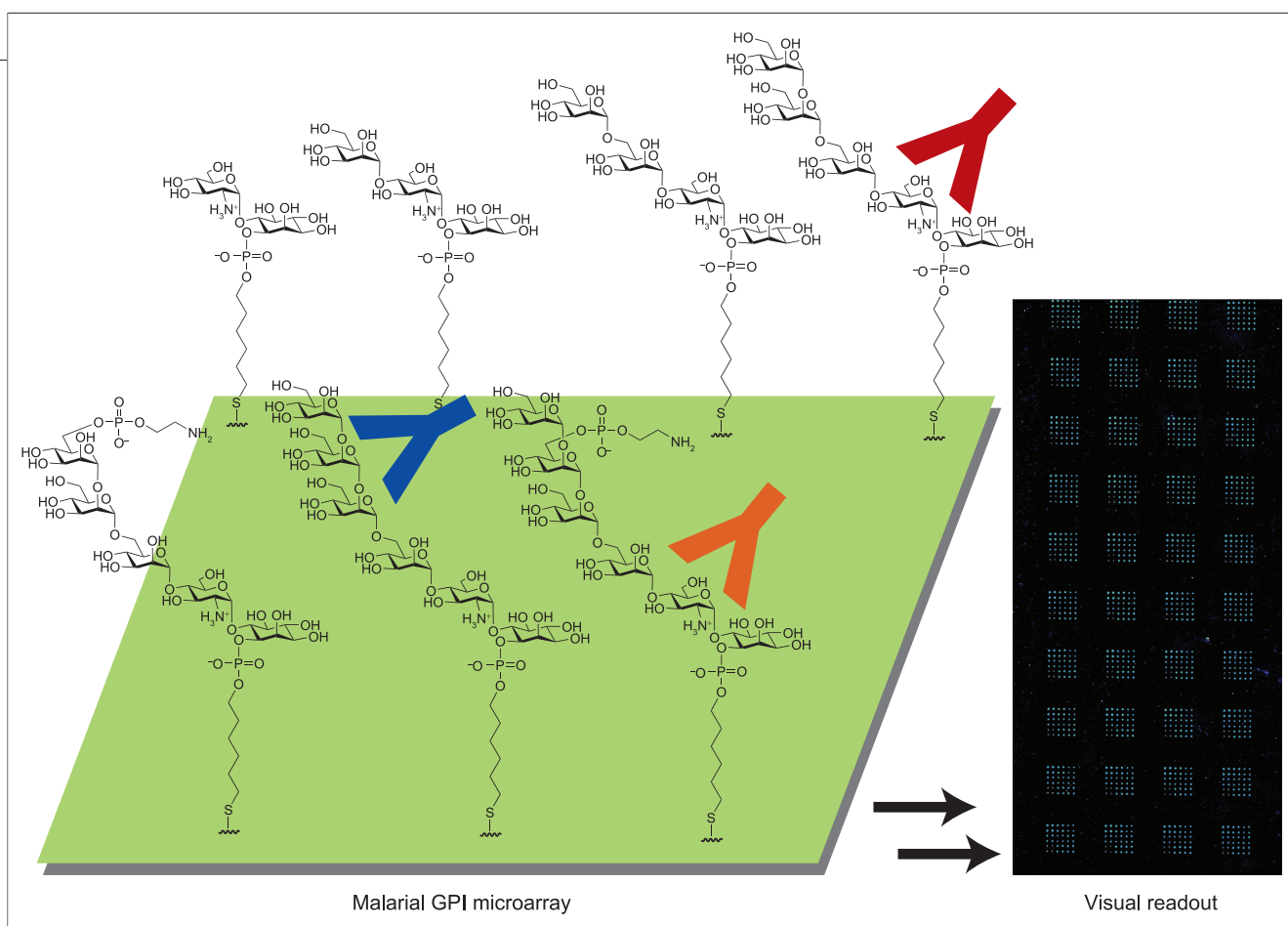
## KEYWORDS

**Glycotools:** Toolkit for the synthesis, conjugation, and analysis of carbohydrates in biological systems.

**Carbohydrate-based vaccines:** Carbohydrate antigen based vaccines; typically the carbohydrate antigen is conjugated to a protein carrier.

**GPI anchored protein:** Protein modified posttranslationally by glycosylation and lipidation; glycosyl phosphatidylinositol (GPI) anchor is used for the correct attachment of proteins to cell surfaces.

**Native chemical ligation (NCL):** widespread method for the total synthesis of proteins based on seminal ligations developed by Wieland and co-workers in 1953 (98); involves the reaction of two unprotected peptide moieties bearing a C-terminal thioester and a N-terminal cysteine.



**Figure 4.** Malarial GPI microarray to probe anti-GPI antibody levels and specificity. Use of covalently bound chemically synthesized GPI on a glass surface to specifically analyze anti-GPI malarial antibodies of noninfected and infected serum.

microarray slides to elucidate differences in binding to the dendritic cell-specific intercellular adhesion molecule grabbing nonintegrin (DC-SIGN) receptor (95). Immobilized lectin arrays have been used to identify the presence of certain glycan structures in a glycoprotein sample (96). This methodology was further applied in the analysis of a dynamic bacterial glycome (97).

Carbohydrate array technology is an important tool that will play a critical role in the correlation of the genome and proteome with the glycome of an organism.

**Conclusions.** Glycan-based therapies hold great promise. However, realizing the full potential of glycans in medicine has been hampered by difficult access to glycoconjugates and the lack of tools for the study of the biological role of these biopolymers. While recent advances in oligosaccharide synthesis, glycoconjugation methodologies, and array and biochemical techniques

for glycan profiling have reduced barriers in glycobiology, the glycotools reviewed here are still far from methods available for proteomic and genomic research. Glycomics will certainly benefit from continued efforts in developing glycan technologies. These tools will not only bring deeper insights into the molecular mechanisms but also result in greater advances into their use in therapeutics and diagnostics. We anticipate that automated synthesis in combination with novel glycoconjugation techniques will allow for the construction of well-defined glycoproteins for vaccination, with the design of such vaccines greatly benefiting from the use of glycoarrays for epitope profiling. For three recent publications of considerable relevance to this topic, see refs 99–101.

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