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Exploring the potential of metallic nanoparticles within synthetic biology

Matthew C. Edmundson, Michael Capeness and Louise Horsfall

School of Biological Sciences, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh EH9 3JR, UK

The fields of metallic nanoparticle study and synthetic biology have a great deal to offer one another. Metallic nanoparticles as a class of material have many useful properties. Their small size allows for more points of contact than would be the case with a similar bulk compound, making nanoparticles excellent candidates for catalysts or for when increased levels of binding are required. Some nanoparticles have unique optical qualities, making them well suited as sensors, while others display para-magnetism, useful in medical imaging, especially by magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). Many of these metallic nanoparticles could be used in creating tools for synthetic biology, and conversely the use of synthetic biology could itself be utilised to create nanoparticle tools. Examples given here include the potential use of quantum dots (QDs) and gold nanoparticles as sensing mechanisms in synthetic biology, and the use of synthetic biology to create nanoparticle-sensing devices based on current methods of detecting metals and metalloids such as arsenate. There are a number of organisms which are able to produce a range of metallic nanoparticles naturally, such as species of the fungus Phoma which produces anti-microbial silver nanoparticles. The biological synthesis of nanoparticles may have many advantages over their more traditional industrial synthesis. If the proteins involved in biological nanoparticle synthesis can be put into a suitable bacterial chassis then they might be manipulated and the pathways engineered in order to produce more valuable nanoparticles.

Introduction

The study of the creation and application of nanoparticles forms an up-and-coming branch of materials science. Typically defined as being a material on the nano-scale (anywhere from 1 to 100 nm in one of their dimensions [1]), we are employing nanoparticles in an ever increasing number of applications in medicine and industry [2,3], and as new tools to aid fundamental scientific research [4]. Nanoparticle properties are very diverse. The properties of the core molecule used, what modifications and functionalisations are made, their size and shape, and any secondary or tertiary structures the nanoparticles are able to form all give rise to the multitude of useful properties nanoparticles exhibit. Their small surface area to volume ratios make them ideal for use as catalysts [5] and the crystal structures some nanoparticles form have unique optical properties [6]. There are many different types of nanoparticles, from lipid-based vesicles for drug delivery to the carbon nanotube, but one of the more diverse and wide-spread types is the metallic nanoparticle. This review will give a brief outline of metal nanoparticles, before looking at how the fields of metallic nanoparticle research and synthetic biology could come together with huge benefits to both.

Metallic nanoparticles

Many metal and metalloid elements are able to form nano-scale structures. Some of the better known nanoparticles currently being investigated include those based on silver, which are known for their anti-microbial and anti-inflammatory properties [7]. Silver has long been known for its ability to combat infection [8], being able to inhibit various aspects of respiration; silver nanoparticles have
larger surface areas, increasing the area available for interactions, making them even more effective anti-microbial agents [9]. Gold nanoparticles are being utilised in imaging, with colloidal gold nanoparticles used in the immunogold labelling of samples to be viewed using transmission electron microscopy (TEM) [10]. The gold nanoparticles are conjugated to a secondary antibody able to bind to a primary antibody, which in turn is raised against a specific target. The electron-dense gold nanoparticles show up as dark spots, allowing the target to be visualised. Also used in imaging are magnetic nanoparticles as contrast agents in magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans. There is a wide range of para-magnetic metal nanoparticles, mostly but not exclusively based on iron. When an external magnetic field is applied these nanoparticles become magnetic themselves, and align themselves with the direction of the external field, showing up as a hypo-exposed region on an MRI scan [11]. Iron-based magnetic nanoparticles, such as Feridex, have mostly been used in vitro or in vivo in experiments, for example in tracking the movement of stem cells implanted into a wound site [12,13]. Nanoparticles are also being put to use in the treatment of diseases. Gold nanoparticles are being used as drug delivery systems [14,15], and some nanoparticles have disease-countering intrinsic properties. Iron-based nanoparticles have been targeted specifically to cancer cells via mesenchymal stem cells able to home in on sites of tumorigenesis; when an external magnetic field is applied the nanoparticles heat up, killing the cancer cells via thermal damage [16]. Catalytic metallic nanoparticles have been developed for a wide array of reactions, from palladium nanoparticles performing Suzuki reactions in the production of styrenes [17] to oxygen reduction reactions in fuel cells performed by platinum nanoparticles [18]. The current boom in these nanoparticle catalysts is seeing extensive research carried out in the design, production and optimisation of these catalysts [19]. Metal nanoparticles also have applications in electronics, photonics and in environmental clean-up, amongst others. Clearly they are a class of material with huge potential.

**Metallic nanoparticles and synthetic biology**

Synthetic biology involves the re-engineering of life to create organisms capable of performing novel functions for industry, medicine and scientific research. Synthetic biology could be enriched by exploring the possibilities metallic nanoparticles provide, and the same is true vice versa; synthetic biology has the potential to be a powerful tool in the production and functionalisation of metal nanoparticles. The modular nature of synthetic biology lends itself very well to metal nanoparticle production. With the ability to swap modules in and out of a chassis it would allow the production of nanoparticles based on many different elements as well as a large number of post-production modifications to a core nanoparticle. By treating the nanoparticles as modular many useful materials can be produced. One area in which it makes sense to begin this joint effort is sensing, both in using nanoparticles as sensors in synthetic biology applications and in using synthetic biology to create methods of sensing the nanoparticles themselves. Once reliable sensing methods have been developed they can form the foundation for producing nanoparticles with other properties, such as catalysts or conductive nanowires.

In creating metallic nanoparticle-based tools for synthetic biology a good starting point would be quantum dots (QDs). QDs are a class of nanocrystals that emit light of specific wavelengths with the size of the nanoparticle determining the wavelength; the larger the size, the higher the wavelength of the infra-red light emitted [20]. A potential hazard in binding QDs to a protein of interest is the fact that QDs can be multivalent. While it is relatively straightforward to bind QDs to proteins, they are capable of additional interactions with the protein and may affect its function. To avoid this complication a method has been developed using phosphothioate DNA (ptDNA) to ‘wrap around’ commercially available CdSe:ZnS QDs, blocking all other potential binding sites (Fig. 1). The ptDNA can be further modified, such as by conjugation with benzylguanine, a molecule which binds SNAP tags. This method was successfully used to target ptDNA/QD particles to Notch receptors carrying a SNAP tag; as CdSe:ZnS QDs emit light at 605 nm the location of these Notch receptors in the cells could then be determined using an imaging microscope and a 488 nm laser [21]. Such a sensing method could readily be applied to any protein of interest. In synthetic biology it is often important to determine the location of a protein of interest, such as ensuring a protein of interest with a trans-membrane domain has been successfully inserted into the membrane. The use of QDs in the manner described would therefore be very useful.

Similarly it is possible to use metal nanoparticles to detect single proteins in situ in mammalian cells. 10 nm gold nanoparticles have been produced which absorb a particular wavelength of lased light. This absorption leads to a temperature change, changing the refractive properties of the nanoparticle, which is detected using a second laser. This method was successfully used to detect the gold nanoparticle labelled-protein mGluR5 (a neurotransmitter-receptor protein) within the cell membrane [22]. This method is a less intrusive way of investigating the trafficking of individual proteins compared to conjugating bulky fluorescence proteins to the protein of interest.

There are also examples of synthetic biology projects with the potential to act as sensors for metal nanoparticles. Synthetic biology is already being used to create ways of sensing elemental and molecular forms of metals, and it is easy to see how these could be modified and expanded upon to create ways of sensing metallic nanoparticles. With the biological production of metal nanoparticles becoming more widespread such sensors would be useful in a
Bacterial/biological production of metal nanoparticles

As well as advances in sensing, synthetic biology offers new approaches in the synthesis and modification of biological nanoparticles. While metallic nanoparticles are widely used in many applications, the current chemical and physical methods for their synthesis can be problematic, often requiring high temperatures and/or pressures, making them very energy-intensive processes and therefore expensive [27]. Additionally, the starting materials for these methods can be expensive and often require very pure grades of substrate. Biological synthesis, however, offers a number of benefits over synthetic processes for nanoparticle production, including: lower reaction temperatures, lower working pressures, the use of a non-pre-catalyst material and cheaper maintenance of the catalyst [27,28]. As such, there has been a lot of research carried out using both prokaryotic and eukaryotic organisms to produce metal nanoparticles with some attributed applications. Organisms generally make nanoparticles as part of their defence against toxic metals. These organisms lower the toxicity of metal ions by reducing them to elemental or less toxic/soluble forms as a by-product of ATP synthesis, and often transport them outside of the cell [29,30].

Both eukaryotes and prokaryotes are known to produce and implement nanoparticles; a summary of the organisms covered in this review and the types of nanoparticle they produce are given in Table 1. One example of a eukaryotic nanoparticle producer is the fungus Phoma, which produces silver nanoparticles as antibacterial agents, and these have been found to have uses as catalysts in the oil industry and for medical applications [27]. Fusarium oxysporum produces nanoparticles of Pt, Zr, Ag, Au, Cd, Pb and Ti [31–33], and the mangrove plant Rhizophora mucronata has been shown to produce antimicrobial silver nanoparticles [34]. However, due to their faster growth rates and ease of manipulation, nanoparticle-producing prokaryotes are the logical choice for developing nanoparticles in synthetic biology, especially since...
many species of bacteria are able to produce nanoparticles naturally. Sulphur reducing bacteria, such as Desulfovibrio, can reduce certain metals such as Au, Pt and Pd to nanoparticle forms. Palladium nanoparticles produced by Desulfovibrio have been shown to be an effective catalyst in hydrogen fuel cells [35] while palladised Desulfovibrio cells have also been used in chromium (IV) decontamination. These nanoparticles proved to be very stable, lasting over eleven times longer than industrially produced palladium nanoparticles [36].

A bacterium that utilises nanoparticles internally is Magnetospirillum gryphiswaldense, which produces magnetic nanoparticles. These aquatic magnetotactic bacteria produce magnetic nanocrystals and encase them in membranes [37], forming structures known as magnetosomes (Fig. 3) possibly for orientation and chemotaxis purposes [38]. This offers the possibility of producing ‘pre-packaged’ nanoparticles.

As well as structures like the magnetosome, a form of nanoparticle known as a nanowire is also produced naturally by some organisms. In respiration under anaerobic conditions Shewanella are able to transport electrons out of the cell along metal nanowires [39] (Fig. 4). The nanowires increase the surface area available to the cell to ‘discharge’ electrons, increasing the rate of electron transfer during respiration. As well as being investigated for their potentially useful conductive properties the compounds produced by the reduction carried out by the nanowires are also worth exploring. Of note is the fact that Shewanella produce nanowires that are able to reduce silica ferricydrate to magnetite (Fe₃O₄) nanoparticles [39]; these have paramagnetic properties, and as mentioned above are used as contrast agents in MRI [11].
**Cupriavidus** and *Pseudomonas* together are able to produce a large number of highly desirable metals in their wild-type forms; it is easy to see how synthetic biology could be used to take such diversity as a starting point and engineer bacteria for wider applications, such as contaminant identification/detoxification as well as the specific production of a nanoparticle from a mixture of substrates such as found in soil or water.

**Possible limitations**

As with most advancements in science and technology there are potential drawbacks and controversial issues. Synthetic biology is certainly no different; the end products are designed to be used in real-life applications, often in areas where they have contact with people outside of science, either in industry or medicine, and as such is at the forefront of public debate. Additionally nanoparticles are a relatively new class of material with characteristics quite different to those of larger scale samples of the same material, where even small differences in size lead to different catalytic properties. Therefore, especially in medicine, the use of nanoparticles is somewhat controversial. Quantum dots have uses in medical research and diagnosis, but in other studies were found to be toxic to cells *in vivo*, leading to an apparent discrepancy between applications and implementations [42].

The problems with using nanoparticles are that for each reported use they have different characteristics, different derivation or are being used in quite different systems, and very little is yet known about their impact on the environment or in potential patients [43]. The solution to this would be standardisation of the nanoparticles used; this is something that is integral to synthetic biology, as standardisation is fundamental to implementation and ease of use. One illustrative example of how standardisation has been implemented is in the form of Biobricks for bacterial genetic manipulation [44,45]. The Biobrick project consists of a large number of standard parts (such as genes and promoters) available to anyone and which can be readily combined into new constructs [46]. This engineering approach to synthetic biology offers a huge number of possible biobrick functions.

As well as drawbacks found with metal nanoparticles themselves there are also potential pitfalls with their biological production. Current methods will need to be optimised in order to ensure that the metal nanoparticles are all of the desired size and composition. It may also be necessary to first engineer a chassis so that it is able to survive in the presence of nanoparticles and their substrates as these may prove toxic to the cells; as mentioned above many of the natural pathways of nanoparticle synthesis in bacteria evolved to deal with the toxicity of metal-containing compounds [29]. Additionally for schemes such as bioremediation there is the issue of releasing engineered organisms into the environment. It would therefore be necessary to use separate strains, using wild-type organisms able to accumulate metals from contaminated land and only using engineered nanoparticle-forming organisms in a controlled environment.

It is the role of synthetic biology, as with all branches of science, to innovate responsibly and to take great care with the synthesis of new materials, and when synthetic biology-inspired standardisation methods and practices are implemented we can begin to assess and control the impact nanoparticles and their production have in applied systems and the environment.

Some bacteria capable of reducing metals to nanoparticle forms have been used in industrial applications. One such bacterium highlighted in early work by Diels [40] is *Cupriavidus metallidurans* (previously *Alcaligenes eutrophus*). It was shown that it could reduce the metals Cd, Cu, Zn, Co, Ni, Pb, Pd, Y and Ge, when they were present as soil contaminants at former industrial sites, precipitating them in carbonate forms that could be removed more easily. This work points out how value can be added to the use of bacteria as a remediation strategy; not only were the organisms used to treat contaminated land but in future they might also be used to retrieve metals for future use. It also showed that the use of non-pure substrates, in this case soil, is also a possibility and puts to work the bacteria’s highly selective ‘sieve-like’ nature to absorb those useful metals and reduce them, often into pure elemental forms of nanoparticle.

Another bacterium of potential industrial value is *Pseudomonas*, which has recently been shown to produce a large array of nanoparticles; work by Srivastava [41] found that *Pseudomonas* produced nanoparticles of Ag, Pd, Fe, Rh, Ni, Ru, Pt and Co, and surprisingly Li as well. All of the nanoparticles were produced at room temperature (Fig. 5), highlighting how little energy is required for their synthesis compared to current methods [41].

![Figure 4](image_url)  
**Figure 4**  
Bacterial nanowires. (a) Scanning electron microscopy image of *Shewanella oneidensis* producing nanowires. (b) Scanning tunnelling microscope image of nanowire conducting electric current [39].
Summary
This review has explored many of the possibilities offered by bringing together aspects of synthetic biology and metallic nanoparticles. Using metallic nanoparticle tools as part of synthetic biology, and using synthetic biology to produce and modify nanoparticles, both fields can achieve a great deal of synergy. Synthetic biology is about adapting existing natural biological capabilities to facilitate the solving of issues faced by science, engineering and medicine. There is a large array of metallic nanoparticle-forming pathways that already exist in nature, ready to be utilised by synthetic biology in producing ‘natural’ and synthetic nanoparticles that are able to compete with industrial products at commercial levels. Real-world applications, such as using synthetic biology to create bacteria capable of cleaning up former industrial sites and converting metal contaminants into useful nanoparticles, are already being investigated. Further work is needed, but unlocking the potential of combining metallic nanoparticles and synthetic biology is worth the effort.

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