Unique structural features in an Nramp metal transporter impart substrate-specific proton cotransport and a kinetic bias to favor import

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Natural resistance-associated macrophage protein (Nramp) transporters enable uptake of essential transition metal micronutrients in numerous biological contexts. These proteins are believed to function as secondary transporters that harness the electrochemical energy of proton gradients by “coupling” proton and metal transport. Here we use the Deinococcus radiodurans (Dra) Nramp homologue, for which we have determined crystal structures in multiple conformations, to investigate mechanistic details of metal and proton transport. We untangle the proton-metal coupling behavior of DraNramp into two distinct phenomena: ΔpH stimulation of metal transport rates and metal stimulation of proton transport.

Thus, this unique salt-bridge network may help Nramp-family transporters maximize metal uptake and reduce deleterious back-transport of acquired metals. We provide a new mechanistic model for Nramp proton-metal cotransport and propose that functional advantages may arise from deviations from the traditional model of symport.

Introduction

Cells commit significant ATP expenditure to maintain ionic gradients across membranes, a form of energy storage. Selective membrane permeability also generates a stable charge imbalance that produces a membrane voltage, generally negative. Secondary transporters harness these electrochemical gradients by coupling the energetically favorable movement of abundant ions (Na⁺, K⁺, H⁺, and Cl⁻) to the (often uphill) movement of substrates (Gadsby, 2009; Forrest et al., 2011; Shilton, 2015; LeVine et al., 2016). Symporters move primary substrate and driving ions in the same direction through an alternating-access mechanism in which only the empty or fully loaded transporter can easily undergo conformational change (Fig. 1 A). Large-magnitude kinetic barriers preclude conformational change for transporters bound to a single species and thus prevent uniport events (Fig. 1 B): “futile cycles” that dissipate the driving ion gradients and, even more deleterious, the back transport of the primary substrate down its concentration gradient (LeVine et al., 2016; Henderson et al., 2019). These secondary transporters’ structures thus evolved to enforce a codependence or “coupling” between primary substrate and driving ions, such that both must simultaneously bind for transport to occur (Boudker and Verdon, 2010; Forrest et al., 2011). The natural resistance-associated macrophage protein (Nramp) family of transporters imports divalent transition metal ions, essential micronutrients serving as cofactors to myriad metabolic enzymes. Prokaryotic Nramps perform high-affinity Mn²⁺ scavenging (Ma et al., 2009; Cellier, 2012), while in eukaryotes, including humans, Nramps are essential to iron dietary uptake, iron trafficking to and recycling from erythrocytes, and the metal-withholding innate immune defense (Andrews, 2008; Hood and Skaar, 2012; Abbaspour et al., 2014; Coffey and Ganz, 2017). Nramps are promiscuous with regard to metal substrate identity: while Mn²⁺ and/or Fe²⁺ are typically the physiological substrates (Supek et al., 1996; Fleming et al., 2016; Henderson et al., 2019).
metal and proton cosubstrates has yet to be demonstrated. In addition, electrophysiological studies of Nramps showed variable proton–metal transport stoichiometries depending on pH and membrane potential (Chen et al., 1999; Nevo and Nelson, 2004), as well as significant proton uniport (Gunshin et al., 1997; Chen et al., 1999; Xu et al., 2004; Mackenzie et al., 2006, 2007; Shawki and Mackenzie, 2010; Bozzi et al., 2019), which suggests loose coupling (Nelson et al., 2002; Henderson et al., 2019). Furthermore, multiple Nramp homologues exhibit a pronounced voltage dependence of metal transport rate (Gunshin et al., 1997; Chen et al., 1999; Xu et al., 2004; Mackenzie et al., 2007).

Crystal structures of prokaryotic Nramp homologues revealed a LeuT-fold (Ehrnstorfer et al., 2014), which is second most common among secondary transporters (Forrest et al., 2011; Shi, 2013), and an alternating-access conformational cycle (Bozzi et al., 2016b, 2019; Ehrnstorfer et al., 2017). These structures and associated mutagenesis studies revealed the large-scale intramolecular rearrangements required for metal transport (Bozzi et al., 2016b, 2019; Ehrnstorfer et al., 2017), the conserved residues that form the metal-binding site and enforce substrate selectivity (Ehrnstorfer et al., 2014; Bozzi et al., 2016a, 2019), and the Nramp-specific network of charged residues that enables proton flux through the outward-open state (Bozzi et al., 2019).

Here, using the Deinococcus radiodurans (Dra) Nramp homologue, for which we previously determined four distinct crystal structures (Bozzi et al., 2016b, 2019), we provide the first detailed in vitro investigation of Nramp metal and proton transport kinetics as a foundation to understand its unique, noncanonical transport mechanism. We find that a physiological negative voltage is required for efficient metal transport to occur, regardless of otherwise favorable metal and proton gradients. We further show that both low external pH and a favorable pH gradient accelerate metal transport, while added metal can in turn stimulate increased proton uptake. Surprisingly, voltage and pH dependence vary significantly based on metal elemental identity, as does the stoichiometry of proton–metal cotransport. (Note that we use “cotransport” to describe macroscopic observations of transport of both metal ions and protons, without a determination of whether these transport events are thermodynamically coupled, and “uniport” to describe macroscopic observations of transport of only metal ions or protons.) Using a large panel of mutations to the conserved residues implicated in metal binding and/or proton transport, we identify structural features that may contribute to the voltage and pH dependence of transport rates and facilitate proton–metal cotransport. We demonstrate that Nramp deviates significantly from the canonical model for symport (Fig. 1), such that proton–metal cotransport, metal uniport, and proton uniport can all occur. Finally, we show that forward metal transport by Nramp occurs much more readily than analogous back transport, regardless of the thermodynamic driving force. This suggests that evolution may have shaped Nramp’s structure to enforce a transport mechanism in which a nearly insurmountable kinetic barrier prevents the loss of cytosolic metal stores.

Figure 1. Kinetic model of canonical symporter. (A) Transport cycle diagram illustrating all possible binding/unbinding/transport events for a canonical symporter. (B) Free energy diagrams for transport events. For a tightly coupled (canonical) symporter, essentially insurmountable kinetic barriers in the protein’s free energy landscape prevent uniport events (dashed lines). Thus, only the empty or fully loaded transporter (solid lines) can efficiently convert from outward-open to inward-open (or vice versa). The combined electrochemical gradients of the primary substrate and the driving ions determine the net direction of cotransport, with a typical physiological situation for symport displayed here (higher concentration of primary substrate inside and higher concentration of driving ion outside).

Gunshin et al., 1997; Sun et al., 2004; Mackenzie et al., 2007). These and similar findings with other homologues (Chen et al., 1999; Tandy et al., 2000; Xu et al., 2004; Mackenzie et al., 2007; Ehrnstorfer et al., 2017) support Nramp’s designation as a symporter that couples proton entry to transition metal uptake (Mackenzie and Hediger, 2004; Courville et al., 2006; Nevo and Nelson, 2006; Cellier, 2012; Shawki et al., 2012). However, strict thermodynamic coupling, such that a gradient of one substrate clearly drives uphill transport of the other, between...
Materials and methods

**In vivo Co\(^{2+}\) transport**

Co\(^{2+}\) transport in *Escherichia coli* was performed as described (Bozzi et al., 2016b, 2019). In brief, C41(DE3) cells expressing WT or mutant DraNramp or an empty vector were grown to OD\(_{600}\) = 0.6 and induced with 0.1 mM isopropyl-\(\beta\)-D-thiogalactoside for 75 min. Cells were washed and aliquoted into 96-well plates at 37°C, and 200 µM Co(NO\(_3\))\(_2\) was added to initiate transport. After the desired time interval, an excess of EDTA was added to quench further uptake. Cells were then pelleted and washed three times before resuspension in 1% (NH\(_4\))\(_2\)S to precipitate internal Co\(^{2+}\). The black precipitated cobalt sulfide darkened cell pellets, allowing quantification of relative metal uptake. The assay buffer was 50 mM HEPES, pH 7.0, 60 mM NaCl, 10 mM KCl, 0.5 mM MgCl\(_2\), and 0.216% glucose. For the varied [K\(^+\)] measurements, the assay buffer was 50 mM HEPES, pH 7.0, 60 mM NaCl, 0.5 mM MgCl\(_2\), X mM KCl, and (82.5 – X) mM choline chloride, with X indicated in the corresponding figure legends. For each biological replicate reported in the figure legends, a separate culture of transformed *E. coli* was grown and induced to express the heterologous Nramp construct.

**Cysteine accessibility measurements**

Cysteine accessibility measurements in *E. coli* were performed as described (Bozzi et al., 2016b, 2019), except that the assay buffer used was the same as for the Co\(^{2+}\) transport experiments. In brief, cells expressing single-cysteine Nramp constructs were grown and aliquoted into 96-well plates as above. Varying concentrations (twofold dilutions) of N-ethylmaleimide (NEM) were added to different wells for 15 min at room temperature (RT) to label accessible cysteines before quenching with excess free cysteine. Cells were then lysed in 6 M urea, 0.1% SDS, and 0.5 mM dithiothreitol (DTT), and an excess (2 mM) of 5K-polyethylene glycol maleimide was added to modify any previously protected cysteines. Samples were analyzed by SDS-PAGE and Western blot using an anti-His fluorescent antibody (Qiagen) to determine the proportion of protein in the normal-weight and 5K-polyethylene glycol-shifted bands. For each biological replicate reported in the figure legends, a separate culture of transformed *E. coli* was grown and induced to express the heterologous Nramp construct.

**Cloning, expression, and purification of DraNramp constructs for proteoliposome assays**

DraNramp constructs were cloned, expressed, and purified as described (Bozzi et al., 2019), with the following changes: protein was purified from cell pellets in a single day and washed/eluted with 0.6 and induced with 0.1 mM isopropyl-\(\beta\)-D-thiogalactoside for 75 min. Cells were washed and aliquoted into 96-well plates at 37°C, and 200 µM Co(NO\(_3\))\(_2\) was added to initiate transport. After the desired time interval, an excess of EDTA was added to quench further uptake. Cells were then pelleted and washed three times before resuspension in 1% (NH\(_4\))\(_2\)S to precipitate internal Co\(^{2+}\). The black precipitated cobalt sulfide darkened cell pellets, allowing quantification of relative metal uptake. The assay buffer was 50 mM HEPES, pH 7.0, 60 mM NaCl, 10 mM KCl, 0.5 mM MgCl\(_2\), and 0.216% glucose. For the varied [K\(^+\)] measurements, the assay buffer was 50 mM HEPES, pH 7.0, 60 mM NaCl, 0.5 mM MgCl\(_2\), X mM KCl, and (82.5 – X) mM choline chloride, with X indicated in the corresponding figure legends. For each biological replicate reported in the figure legends, a separate culture of transformed *E. coli* was grown and induced to express the heterologous Nramp construct.

Proteoliposome transport assays and data analysis

Proteoliposomes loaded with either 100 µM Fura-2 or 150 µM BICEF were diluted into buffer containing appropriate [K\(^{+}\)] to establish the desired membrane potential and aliquoted into 96-well black clear-bottom plates. Following baseline fluorescence measurement, 5X metal (750 µM final concentration unless otherwise noted) was added to each assay; stocks of 100 mM CdCl\(_2\), MnCl\(_2\), ZnCl\(_2\), Co(NO\(_3\))\(_2\), and CaCl\(_2\) were freshly diluted into appropriate NaCl or KCl buffer. For assays with a pH gradient, the metals were diluted into 100 mM Mes at pH 5.5, 5.8, 6.0, or 6.5 or MOPS at pH 7.2 with appropriate NaCl/KCl. The reported external pH upon metal addition was determined from proportional mixings of larger volumes of the same buffers. To premoldify A61C constructs for transport assays, liposomes were diluted into 120 mM NaCl and 10 mM MOPS, pH 7.0, containing 3 mM 2-(trimethylammonium)ethyl methanethiosulfonate (MTSET) and incubated at least 30 min at RT before beginning transport assays. Metal transport was monitored by measuring Fura-2 fluorescence at λ\(_{ex}\) = 340 and 380 nm and λ\(_{em}\) = 510 nm. Proton transport was monitored by measuring BICEF fluorescence at λ\(_{ex}\) = 450 and 490 nm and λ\(_{em}\) = 535 nm. To calculate concentrations of imported metal, the Fura-2 340/380 ratio and experimentally determined K\(_V\) values (Grynkiewicz et al., 1985; Hinkle et al., 1992) were used for Ca\(^{2+}\) and Cd\(^{2+}\) as described previously (Bozzi et al., 2016a); the Ca\(^{2+}\) K\(_V\) value was used as an approximation for Zn\(^{2+}\). For Mn\(^{2+}\), Fe\(^{2+}\), and Co\(^{2+}\), the fraction...
of Fura-2 340 and/or 380 fluorescence quenched, normalized to maximum observed quenching, was used to estimate imported metal. For proton uptake, the BCECF 450/490 ratio was used to calculate internal pH, which, along with the known total internal buffer (0.5 mM) and dye (150 μM) concentration, was used to calculate net proton import via the Henderson-Hasselbalch equation. Initial rates were calculated in Excel, and Michaelis–Menten parameters were fitted using Matlab. For some Mn2+ uptake traces (typically at low magnitude ΔΨ), a brief initial lag in uptake was observed, the origin of which remains unexplained at this time. For these traces, the first few data points were omitted when determining the transport rate. For each technical replicate reported in the figure legends, a separate aliquot of dye-loaded proteoliposomes was diluted into the appropriate outside buffer, including cysteine modifiers if applicable, and then fluorescence time course data were collected before and after the addition of valinomycin, metal substrate, and/or ionomycin. Note that for metal uptake measurements, the assay setup precludes an accurate measure of equilibrium internal metal concentration, as the Fura-2 concentration limits the maximum detectable signal, and Fura-2 likely acts as a thermodynamic sink for divalent cations. Therefore, transport rates were calculated from data before the Fura-2 signal reached 50% saturation.

Online supplemental material
Figs. S1, S2, S3, S5, S7, S8, S10, and S11 contain representative traces and controls for liposome metal or proton uptake for the initial rate data presented in Figs. 2, 3, 5, 7, 8 A, 8 C, 9, and 10, respectively. Figs. S1, S4, and S6 contain additional data from the in vivo Co2+ uptake assay. Figs. S7 and S9 contain additional initial rate data at different voltages from the data presented in Fig. 8 A and 8 C, respectively. Table S1 summarizes the effects of mutagenesis data presented in Figs. 7, 8, and 9.

Results
The membrane potential accelerates DraNramp metal transport rates
Our investigation of the role of transmembrane (TM) voltage in DraNramp’s mechanism stems from trying to reconcile an apparent inconsistency between in vivo and in vitro protein behavior. Purified DraNramp reconstituted into proteoliposomes (Figs. 2 A and S1) with large metal substrate gradients transported Cd2+, a toxic metal known to be a good Nramp substrate (Courville et al., 2008; Illing et al., 2012), but not the biological substrates Mn2+ or Fe2+, or similar metals such as Zn2+ or Co2+ (Figs. 2 B and S1 D). In contrast DraNramp robustly transported Co2+ when expressed in E. coli (Fig. S1 B).

Bacteria, including E. coli, maintain a membrane potential (ΔΨ) between ~140 and ~220 mV (Bot and Prodan, 2010), which greatly influences ion transport thermodynamics. When we applied voltage across proteoliposome membranes using K+ gradients and the K+-specific ionophore valinomycin, DraNramp transported Mn2+ at ~40 mV or below (Fig. 2 B), and Fe2+, Zn2+, and Co2+ at ~80 mV (Figs. 2 B and S1 D), with notable acceleration at ~120 mV (Figs. 2 B and S1 D). Indeed, by measuring transport rates at 10-mV increments, under these conditions we saw metal-specific apparent threshold voltages for metal transport with Mn2+, followed by Zn2+ and Fe2+, then Co2+ requiring progressively larger potential differences to observe metal transport, while Cd2+ was transported across the whole measured range (Figs. 2 C and S1 E). In fact, when extending our liposome assay to values of ΔΨ >0, which reduces favorability of cation entry, DraNramp still transported Cd2+, but not Mn2+, down its concentration gradient even at +50 mV (Fig. S1, F–H).

Overall, these trends are similar to the voltage dependence of mammalian Nramp2 Fe2+ transport observed via electrophysiology (Gunshin et al., 1997; Chen et al., 1999; Nevo and Nelson, 2004; Xu et al., 2004; Mackenzie et al., 2006, 2007; Pujol-Giménez et al., 2017) and transport assays using radioactive Fe2+ (Chen et al., 1999).

We next measured transport across a range of metal concentrations at a physiologically relevant ΔΨ of ~150 mV (Fig. 2 D) to determine the Michaelis–Menten constant (Km). The Km for substrate at ~150 mV correlated with the observed threshold voltage (Fig. 2 C): Mn2+ and Cd2+ had the lowest Km and the lowest magnitude threshold ΔΨ, Co2+ had the highest Km and highest magnitude threshold ΔΨ, and Zn2+ and Fe2+ were intermediate for both. Our Km values are consistent with in vivo Co2+ uptake data (Fig. S1 I) and within an order of magnitude of prior DraNramp Km estimates of ~10 µM for Cd2+ and ~10–100 µM for Mn2+ (Bozzi et al., 2016a). These Km values are also of similar magnitude to previously reported values for in vivo Cd2+ and Mn2+ transport by the E. coli Nramp homologue (51% identical and 72% similar to DraNramp; Kehres et al., 2000; Haemig and Brooker, 2004; Courville et al., 2008; Lan et al., 2012). The much lower Km values (<10 µM) for Mn2+ and Cd2+ than other divalent metal substrates is consistent with trends first observed in E. coli Nramp (Kehres et al., 2000; Makui et al., 2000) but contrasts with human Nramp2 (DMT1; 26% identical and 48% similar to DraNramp), which has Km values for Mn2+, Fe2+, Co2+, and Cd2+ in the low µM range (Forbes and Gros, 2003; Illing et al., 2012). These results suggest that these bacterial homologues have higher specificity for their intended substrate, Mn2+, with incidental high Cd2+ affinity.

Next, to recapitulate this voltage dependence trend in the context of a bacterial membrane, we varied external [K+] in our Co2+-uptake assay using DraNramp-expressing E. coli. This likely perturbed the membrane potential, as E. coli maintain a significant cytosolic [K+] (Shabala et al., 2009). While we did not directly measure changes to the bacterial membrane potential induced by the added K+, high [K+] indeed drastically decreased DraNramp Co2+ transport (Figs. 2 E and S1 J; see Fig. S6 below for comparison to DraNramp point mutants). As this trend was consistent with our liposome assay results (Figs. 2 C and S1 E), we suspect that the added K+ had the intended effect of reducing the magnitude of ΔΨ.

As one explanation for our results, the membrane potential might perturb DraNramp’s gross conformational landscape, with the outward-facing state relatively destabilized at lower magnitude voltages, as seen with the structurally related SGLT1 transporter (Loo et al., 1998). However, although high extracellular [K+] greatly impaired Co2+ transport, it had little effect
on the accessibility to NEM modification of single-cysteine reporters that are exposed to bulk solvent either only in the inward-open (A53C) or outward-open (A61C) states (Bozzi et al., 2016b, 2019; Fig. 2, F and G; and Fig. S1 K). This suggests that the membrane potential does not cause gross changes in the DraN-ramp conformational preference, although more sophisticated measurements could still uncover effects of TM voltage on conformational landscape. This finding is, however, consistent with the observed substrate-specific threshold voltages, as a shift in conformational equilibrium that completely inhibits transport of all metals (as seen with conformationally locked DraN-ramp variants; Bozzi et al., 2016b, 2019) does not account for these differences. Our consistent in vivo and in vitro findings indicate that the reconstituted transporter does indeed function the same as in the native membrane, and that TM voltage, which was not controlled for in our initial reconstitutions, is a critical variable controlling metal transport kinetics.

Acidic outside pH gradients accelerate DraN-ramp metal import
In addition to ΔΨ’s importance, for a wide range of Nramp homologues, low external pH accelerates metal transport (Gunshin et al., 1997; Agranoff et al., 1999, 2005; Chen et al., 1999; Kehres et al., 2005; Watanabe et al., 2006; Ishizaki et al., 2010; Eberley et al., 2013; Watanabe et al., 2013; Ishizaki et al., 2014; Eberley et al., 2014; Ishizaki et al., 2015; Eberley et al., 2015; Ishizaki et al., 2016; Eberley et al., 2016; Ishizaki et al., 2017; Eberley et al., 2017). The mechanism by which pH gradients affect metal transport is not yet fully understood, but it is thought to involve changes in the conformational landscape of the transporter or in the metal-binding properties of the extracellular loops (Eberley et al., 2014; Ishizaki et al., 2015; Eberley et al., 2016; Ishizaki et al., 2017; Eberley et al., 2018).}

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et al., 2000; Makui et al., 2000; Tandy et al., 2000; Sacher et al., 2001; Buracco et al., 2015). We therefore compared DraNramp Cd\(^{2+}\) and Mn\(^{2+}\) transport in proteoliposomes in the presence of an acidic outside pH gradient (\(\Delta pH\)) of varying magnitudes (Fig. 3 A). While \(\Delta pH\) moderately enhanced Cd\(^{2+}\) transport (Fig. 3 B), it more dramatically accelerated Mn\(^{2+}\) transport, even enabling transport at 0 mV (Fig. 3 C).

The observed stimulation could result from lower pH, a favorable \(\Delta pH\), or a combination of both factors increasing DraNramp’s metal transport rate. We therefore reconstituted DraNramp into proteoliposomes with internal pH of 6 or 7 and measured Cd\(^{2+}\) and Mn\(^{2+}\) transport in the presence and absence of a \(\Delta pH\) at either \(\Delta \Psi = 0\) or \(-60\) mV (Fig. 3 D). For Cd\(^{2+}\) and Mn\(^{2+}\), a favorable \(\Delta pH\) (6 outside and 7 inside) accelerated transport compared with no \(\Delta pH\), while unfavorable \(\Delta pH\) (7 outside and 6 inside) slowed uptake (Fig. 3 E and F), with Mn\(^{2+}\) again showing a wider spread of transport rates (Fig. S2). With no \(\Delta pH\), Cd\(^{2+}\) transport rates were similar at acidic pH (6 outside and inside) or neutral pH (7 outside and inside; Figs. 3 E and S2 A). In contrast, in the absence of \(\Delta pH\), acidic pH somewhat accelerated Mn\(^{2+}\) transport compared with neutral pH (Figs. 3 F and S2 B). Overall, low pH and \(\Delta pH\) had larger-magnitude effects on Mn\(^{2+}\) transport rates than on Cd\(^{2+}\) transport rates.

Voltage and pH gradients affect \(K_m\) and \(V_{max}\) of DraNramp metal transport
To further investigate the effects of TM voltage and pH gradients on DraNramp transport, we determined Michaelis–Menten parameters for Mn\(^{2+}\) and Cd\(^{2+}\) transport kinetics in the absence or presence of a favorable \(\Delta pH\) at three \(\Delta \Psi\) values (Fig. 4). For both metals, with and without \(\Delta pH\), a more negative \(\Delta \Psi\) increased transport efficiency by improving both \(K_m\) and \(V_{max}\). Strikingly, in the absence of \(\Delta pH\), hyperpolarizing \(\Delta \Psi\) from \(-50\) to \(-150\) mV decreased the \(K_m\) values for Cd\(^{2+}\) and Mn\(^{2+}\) >20- and 300-fold, respectively. Thus, in addition to its potential to act as a thermodynamic driving force, \(\Delta \Psi\) appears to shape the free energy landscape that dictates DraNramp transport kinetics and may therefore influence metal binding and other steps in the transport mechanism. While in all six cases \(\Delta pH\) increased \(V_{max}\), the effects on \(K_m\) were mixed (Fig. 4). Indeed, \(\Delta pH\) decreased \(K_m\) for both metals at lower-magnitude \(\Delta \Psi\) but increased \(K_m\) at higher-magnitude \(\Delta \Psi\). Generally, \(\Delta \Psi\) and \(\Delta pH\) are more synergistic for Mn\(^{2+}\) and more antagonistic for Cd\(^{2+}\), which may hint at a mechanistic difference for how DraNramp transports these two metal substrates.

Stimulation of proton transport is substrate specific in DraNramp
Like other Nramp homologues (Gunshin et al., 1997; Chen et al., 1999; Mackenzie et al., 2007; Ehrnstorfer et al., 2017), DraNramp also transports protons in addition to divalent metals (Bozzi et al., 2019). We therefore measured H\(^+\) transport by DraNramp (Fig. 5 A) at a range of voltages in the absence or presence of metal substrate (Figs. 5 B and S3 A). While DraNramp efficiently transported all tested metals (except Ca\(^{2+}\)) at \(-120\) mV and to some degree at \(-80\) mV (Figs. 2 B and S1 D), only Mn\(^{2+}\),
Fe²⁺, and Co²⁺ stimulated H⁺ influx above basal rates (Fig. 5 C). Despite robust Cd²⁺ uptake across all potentials, Cd²⁺ failed to stimulate significant H⁺ transport. Indeed, at −120 mV, where H⁺ uniport (uptake in the absence of added metal) became significant, Cd²⁺ noticeably reduced the H⁺ influx rate (Fig. 5, Band C). DraNramp’s two best substrates, which should nearly saturate the metal-binding site at −80 and −120 mV, gave initial rate stoichiometries of ∼1H⁺:1 Mn²⁺ and 0 H⁺:1 Cd²⁺ (Fig. 5 C), confirming that proton-metal cotransport is substrate specific.

In addition, across a range of Mn²⁺ concentrations, higher Mn²⁺-transport rates corresponded with higher H⁺-transport rates (Fig. S3, B and C), consistent with the trend previously seen for Eremococcus coleocola Nramp in proteoliposomes (Ehrnstorfer et al., 2017). Interestingly, H⁺:Fe²⁺ stoichiometries significantly exceeded the 1:1 seen for Mn²⁺, which may reflect an additional complexity in the DraNramp transport mechanism that we do not yet fully understand; indeed, highly variable, condition-dependent H⁺:Fe²⁺ stoichiometries were previously reported for eukaryotic Nramp homologues (Chen et al., 1999).

Taken together with the fact that ΔpH affected the transport kinetics of both Mn²⁺ and Cd²⁺, this indicates that “proton-metal coupling” in Nramps comprises at least two distinct phenomena: (a) ΔpH accelerates metal transport and (b) H⁺ cotransport is stimulated by certain metal substrates. Below, using insights gleaned from DraNramp’s structures and mutagenesis experiments, we begin to mechanistically explain these surprising results.

Figure 4. Voltage and pH gradients govern metal transport kinetics. (A and B) Dose–response curves for Cd²⁺ (A) and Mn²⁺ (B) transport at different external pH and ΔΨ values in proteoliposomes with internal pH = 7. Data are averages ± SEM (n = 3). Errors in Km and Vmax reported in the inset table encompass the uncertainty of the fit (shown as curved lines) to the data.

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Figure 5. Proton cotransport is metal specific. (A) Schematic for detecting H⁺ influx into proteoliposomes at various ΔΨ values, pH 7.0 on both sides, in the absence or presence of 750 µM metal substrate. The setup was identical to that used in Fig. 2 (A and B), except the pH-sensitive dye BCECF replaced the metal-sensitive dye Fura-2. (B) Representative time traces (n = 8) of H⁺ uptake into proteoliposomes. Negative ΔΨ drove DraNramp H⁺ import. Mn²⁺ and Co²⁺ stimulated H⁺ entry, while Cd²⁺ did not and instead reduced H⁺ influx at ΔΨ = −120 mV. (C) Initial metal (black) and H⁺ (color) uptake rates show that Mn²⁺, Fe²⁺, and Co²⁺ transport stimulated H⁺ influx above its basal no-metal rate, while Cd²⁺ and Zn²⁺ transport did not. Stoichiometry ratios (numbers above bars) were calculated for Cd²⁺ and Mn²⁺ and were ∼1:1 for Mn²⁺:H⁺ transport in the presence of metal. Data are averages ± SEM (n ≥ 4). See also Fig. S3.
DraNramp metal-binding site abuts an extended salt-bridge network

Our structures of DraNramp in multiple conformational states (Bozzi et al., 2016b, 2019) provide a framework to understand the mechanistic details of voltage dependence, $\Delta$H stimulation, and metal-stimulated proton transport. DraNramp’s 11 α-helical TM segments adopt the common LeuT-fold (Yamashita et al., 2005; Boudker and Verdon, 2010; Forrest et al., 2011; Shi, 2013; Fig. 6 A). Conserved residues D56, N59, and M230 coordinate metal substrate throughout the transport process (Ehrnstorfer et al., 2014; Bozzi et al., 2019; Fig. 6 B). Below the binding site, conserved H237 on TM6b lines the metal’s exit route to the cytosol (Bozzi et al., 2019; Figs. 6 C and S4 A). Adjacent to D56, a conserved network of charged and protonatable residues leads into the structurally rigid cluster formed by TMs 3, 4, 8, and 9 to provide a parallel ~20-Å H+ transport pathway toward the cytosol (Bozzi et al., 2019; Fig. 6 C and D; and Fig. S4, A and B). These residues form a sequence of three interacting pairs: H232-E134, D131-R353, and R352-E124. This salt-bridge network is unique to the Nramp clade in the LeuT family of structurally and evolutionarily related transporters (Cellier, 2012, 2016; Bozzi et al., 2019).

In multiple Nramp homologues, D56 and N59 contribute to metal transport (Courville et al., 2008; Ehrnstorfer et al., 2014, 2017; Bozzi et al., 2016a, 2019), while M230 contributes to a selectivity filter that favors transition metals over alkaline earth metals (Ehrnstorfer et al., 2014; Bozzi et al., 2016a). Mutations to E124, D131, E134, H232, and H237 abrogate Mn2+ transport in E. coli Nramp (Haemig and Brooker, 2004; Haemig et al., 2010), while mutations to H232 and H237 (Lam-Yuk-Tseung et al., 2003; Mackenzie et al., 2006) and R353 (Lam-Yuk-Tseung et al., 2006) impair metal transport in mammalian DMT1, with the latter mutation also causing anemia (Iolascon et al., 2006). Recent studies using different Nramp homologues implicated E134 or H232 in proton–metal coupling (Ehrnstorfer et al., 2017; Pujo-Giménez et al., 2017), and we demonstrated the importance of D56 and D131 in addition to E134 and H232 to DraNramp H+ transport (Bozzi et al., 2019). From structure-based pKα predictions, we therefore proposed D56 as the initial proton-binding site and D131 as the subsequent proton acceptor required for TM transport (Bozzi et al., 2019).

Hypothesizing that this network of conserved charged and protonatable residues contributes to the voltage dependence and proton-metal cotransport phenomena, we designed a panel of point mutations that remove or neutralize these sidechains via

Figure 6. A network of highly conserved charged and protonatable residues adjoins the metal-binding site. (A) Crystal structure of DraNramp in an outward-open conformation bound to Mn2+ (magenta sphere; PDB accession no. 6BU5; Bozzi et al., 2019). TMs 1, 5, 6, and 10 are gold; TMs 2, 7, and 11 are gray; and TMs 3, 4, 8, and 9 are blue. (B) D56, N59, M230, and the A53 carbonyl coordinate Mn2+ in the outward-open state, along with two waters (not depicted). (C) View from the plane of the membrane of a network consisting of E134, H232, D131, R353, R352, and E124 that extends ~20 Å from D56 to the cytosol. TMs 8 and 4–5, in front of TMs 3 and 9, respectively, were removed for clarity. (D) Sequence logos from an alignment of 6,878 Nramp sequences. All 10 mutated residues (numbers above) are highly conserved. Canonical helix-breaking motifs at the metal-binding site are DPGN in TM1 and MPH in TM6. TM6’s H237 is a glycine in many fungal homologues. The second TM9 arginine (R353) varies in location (*) due to an extra helical turn in many homologues; this insertion contains a third arginine in some homologues. See also Fig. S4.
alanine, asparagine, or glutamine substitution. All DraNramp mutants expressed well in *E. coli* (Fig. S4, C and D) and were readily purified. We reconstituted each in proteoliposomes to further explore how each conserved residue contributes to DraNramp’s metal and proton transport behavior.

**Mutations to conserved salt-bridge network perturb voltage dependence of metal transport rate**

With our mutant panel, we first measured the effect of $\Delta \Psi$ on in vitro Cd$^{2+}$ and Mn$^{2+}$ transport (Figs. 7 A and S5). Most mutants retained some transport of either or both substrates, except metal-binding D56 mutants. Compared with WT, the remaining mutants clustered in two groups in terms of the impact of $\Delta \Psi$ on metal transport rate.

Mutations to N59, M230, H232, and H237 largely preserved WT-like voltage dependence. These TM1 and TM6 residues clustered in the metal-binding site or metal-release pathway (Fig. 7 B). Mutations to TM3 and TM9 salt-bridge network residues E124, R352, R353, and E134 reduced voltage dependence of Mn$^{2+}$ and Cd$^{2+}$ transport across the tested $\Delta \Psi$s (Fig. 7). All reduced transport rates at $-120$ mV, but many equaled and several outperformed WT at lower-magnitude $\Delta \Psi$. Perturbing this network of residues thus alters $\Delta \Psi$’s effects on DraNramp’s metal transport kinetics, thus eliminating most metal transport when $\Delta \Psi$ is zero or positive.

**Mutations adjacent to metal-binding site eliminate $\Delta p$H stimulation of metal transport rate**

We sought to identify which residues contribute most to the observed $\Delta p$H stimulation of DraNramp metal transport (Fig. 3). We therefore measured Mn$^{2+}$ transport by our mutants in liposomes across a range of external $p$Hs (and thus $\Delta p$Hs) in either the absence or presence of a $\Delta \Psi$ $< 0$ (Figs. 8 A and S7). Mutant phenotypes again clustered in three groups (Fig. 8 B). As before, mutants to metal-binding D56 and N59 eliminated Mn$^{2+}$ transport, while H237Q showed slight activity in the presence of both $\Delta \Psi$ and $\Delta p$H. As with voltage dependence, all mutants to the E124-R352-R353-D131-E134 network reduced the Mn$^{2+}$-transport enhancement provided by $\Delta p$H to a level comparable to Cd$^{2+}$ in WT. Strikingly, mutants M230A, H232Q, and E134Q, all near metal-binding D56, eliminated $\Delta p$H stimulation, such that unlike WT, Mn$^{2+}$ transport was not observed in the absence of $\Delta \Psi$, no matter the $\Delta p$H (Fig. S7). Thus, the immediate vicinity of the metal-binding site is most crucial for the kinetic stimulation provided by $\Delta p$H, while more distant salt-bridge network residues contribute to a lesser degree.

**Mutations throughout the salt-bridge network alter proton transport behavior**

We previously showed that mutations to D65, H232, E134, and D131 eliminated DraNramp’s voltage-driven proton uniport, thus leading us to propose those four residues as the core of a conserved proton-transport pathway (Bozzi et al., 2019). In
addition, mutations to the more-distant salt-bridge network residues R353, R352, and E124 increased the rate of proton uniport (Bozzi et al., 2019). Here we measured how metal substrates Cd²⁺ and Mn²⁺ affect proton transport at −120 and −80 mV for our mutant panel (Figs. 8 C, S8, and S9). Mutations to D56, H232, E134, and D131 eliminated metal-stimulated H⁺ transport (although E134A retained slight Mn²⁺ stimulation). Thus, the same four residues that are indispensable for proton uniport are also required for metal-evoked proton uptake, suggesting that uniported and cotransported protons follow the same pathway. (While H237Q also eliminated basal and metal-stimulated H⁺ transport, this phenotype most likely arises from that mutation preventing the protein from sampling the outward-open state needed for proton transport to occur; Bozzi et al., 2019). In contrast to its inhibition of WT, Cd²⁺ stimulated H⁺ uptake for mutants to metal-binding N59 and M230, and R352 18 Å away (Figs. 8 C, S8, and S9). Strikingly, for the E124 and R353 mutants, either Mn²⁺ or Cd²⁺ sharply reduced H⁺ transport (Figs. 8 C, S8, and S9); thus Mn²⁺ now behaved more like Cd²⁺ did for WT.

Overall, any mutation to the extended network eliminated the distinction between Cd²⁺ and Mn²⁺ in terms of proton co-transport (Fig. 8 D). This is consistent with previous observations of subtle perturbations to this network affecting proton transport in other Nramp homologues, as seen with an anemia-causing mutation G185R on TM4 in mouse Nramp2 (Fleming et al., 1998; Su et al., 1998; G153R in DraNramp) directly above the R353-D131 pair (Xu et al., 2004), and an F-to-I substitution in human Nramp2 at the DraNramp equivalent L164 adjacent to R352-E124 (Nevo and Nelson, 2004). Curiously, some DraNramp mutants (D131A, E134A) retained some ΔpH (and/or low pH) stimulation while eliminating metal-stimulated H⁺ transport, while M230A shows the opposite pattern. Mutations to the salt-bridge network residues furthest from D56 increase rate of H⁺ transport without metal but have variable effects on metal stimulation. See also Fig. S5 for representative time traces of these results and Fig. S9.

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(Ehrnstorfer et al., 2017), while D56 mutations eliminated all metal and proton transport. These mutagenesis results further suggest that ΔpH stimulation of metal transport rate need not necessarily arise from a proton cotransport requirement.

Perturbing the salt-bridge network alters K_m and selectivity
As high transport efficiency requires selectivity against potential competing substrates, we tested whether our mutants transport Ca^{2+}, an abundant alkaline earth metal that Nramps must discriminate against (Fig. 9, A and B; and Fig. S10). Most mutations did not increase Ca^{2+} transport. Thus, their perturbations of voltage and ΔpH dependence of metal transport rate do not arise from indiscriminate metal transport. Metal-binding D56 and N59 mutations reduced Ca^{2+} transport below WT levels, indicating that Ca^{2+} transport requires the same metal-binding site as other metals. Two mutations enhanced Ca^{2+} uptake: M230A, which removes the metal-coordinating methionine that preferentially stabilizes transition metals (Bozzi et al., 2016a), and R353A. The altered selectivity of R353A, 15 Å away from the bound metal, is reminiscent of G153R, which adds exogenous positive charge to the salt-bridge network region and, despite not being part of the primary coordination sphere, can structurally perturb the metal-binding site to improve Ca^{2+} transport (Xu et al., 2004; Bozzi et al., 2016b).

We next compared Cd^{2+} and Mn^{2+} transport by select mutants across a range of metal concentrations to understand how these residues impact transport under more physiologically relevant conditions (Fig. 9, C and D). Most mutations had little impact on Cd^{2+} transport even at low μM concentrations and thus retained transport efficiency (calculated as V_{max}/K_m) within twofold of WT. The exception was M230A, which drastically reduced Cd^{2+} transport, consistent with the importance of this residue for Cd^{2+} affinity (Ehrnstorfer et al., 2014; Bozzi et al., 2016a, 2019). In contrast, all mutations reduced Mn^{2+} transport rate at environmentally relevant low Mn^{2+} concentrations, resulting in 5- to 50-fold lower efficiency. Thus, mutagenic perturbations to the transporter that reduce voltage dependence or eliminate the metal-stimulated proton transport also impair function under physiological conditions. That these mutations alter Dranramp’s relative substrate preferences is consistent with an allosteric functional link between the salt-bridge network and the metal-binding site.

Mutations to the salt-bridge network increase deleterious Mn^{2+} back-transport
Finally, we probed whether mutations to the salt-bridge network that perturbed voltage dependence and proton transport may also impact the observed directional bias of DraNramp.

Figure 9. Perturbations to the conserved salt-bridge network alter metal selectivity and increase K_m for Mn^{2+}. (A) Average initial Ca^{2+} transport rates ± SEM (n ≥ 4) at −120 mV with pH 7.0 on both sides of the membrane and 750 µM Ca^{2+}. (B) Schematic of mutation locations. M230A, or R353A, 15 Å away, both increased Ca^{2+} transport. D56 and N59 mutations eliminated Ca^{2+} uptake, and other mutants were similar to WT. (C and D) Dose–response curves of Cd^{2+} (C) or Mn^{2+} (D) transport at −150 mV with pH 7.0 on both sides of the membrane for a subset of mutants that reduce or eliminate ΔΨ dependence, ΔpH stimulation, or metal-dependent proton transport. Data are averages ± SEM (n ≥ 2). The resulting transport kinetic values (middle) show significant overlap for Cd^{2+} transport but wider separation for the physiological substrate Mn^{2+}. M230A is the only mutation that impaired Cd^{2+} transport more severely than Mn^{2+} transport. Errors in K_m and V_{max} encompass the uncertainty of the fit to the data. See also Fig. S10 for representative time traces of the data in A.
metal transport (Bozzi et al., 2019). We reconstituted DraNramp constructs containing the C382S mutation to remove the lone endogenous cysteine and the single-cysteine A61C that lines the external vestibule (Bozzi et al., 2016b) and applied membrane-impermeable MTSET. Covalent modification of A61C with MTSET nearly eliminates metal transport in vivo (Bozzi et al., 2016b) and in vitro (Bozzi et al., 2019), likely by preventing outward-to-inward conformational change essential for metal transport (Bozzi et al., 2019; Fig. S11B). DraNramp randomly orient in proteoliposomes with ∼50% inside-out and ∼50% outside-out (Bozzi et al., 2019). In proteoliposomes, MTSET treatment should incapacitate outside-out transporters, leaving inside-out proteins unaffected, and therefore theoretically capable of metal transport (Figs. 10 A and S11 A). DraNramp orients randomly in proteoliposomes with ∼50% inside-out and ∼50% outside-out (Bozzi et al., 2019). In proteoliposomes, MTSET treatment should incapacitate outside-out transporters, leaving inside-out proteins unaffected, and therefore theoretically capable of metal transport (Figs. 10 A and S11 A). Strikingly, while MTSET essentially eliminated Mn2+ transport for the WT-like protein, the salt-bridge network mutants D131N, E134A, and R352A retained significant Mn2+ transport, likely reflecting increased activity from inside-out transporters. In addition, MTSET treatment eliminated more Mn2+ transport than Cd2+ transport, which did not require H+ cotransport (Fig. 5). (C) A61C liposome assay mimics cellular context for DraNramp back transport. Metal influx into MTSET-treated proteoliposomes occurs down a concentration gradient but against a ΔΨ > 0, just as metal efflux would in vivo. See also Fig. S11 for representative time traces of these results. 

Discussion

Our kinetic studies with DraNramp show that a range of transport processes can occur under physiological conditions (Fig. 11 A). Metal and proton transport rate measurements reveal DraNramp performs H+ uniport, 1:1 Mn2+:H+ cotransport, and Cd2+ uniport (Fig. 5). Thus, the expected kinetic barriers that would prevent uncoupled transport in canonical symporters must be significantly diminished in DraNramp (Fig. 11 B). However, we do not observe Mn2+ uptake by WT DraNramp without accompanying H+, suggesting that efficient Mn2+ transport may require the presence of a H+ cosubstrate. Furthermore, membrane potential dramatically affects the rates of all DraNramp transport events, to the extent that a sufficiently negative ΔΨ is required for otherwise thermodynamically favorable metal transport to occur on the time-scale of our measurements (Fig. 2). Physiological membrane potential must therefore significantly modulate the kinetic barriers for metal transport (Fig. 11 B). Lastly, our results suggest that metal transport by DraNramp is not kinetically symmetric, as metal transport is much faster for influx than...
protonated to optimally orient the metal-binding residues—
donating a hydrogen bond to the metal-interacting N59 carbonyl oxygen rather than receiving a hydrogen bond from the amide nitrogen (Fig. 12 B)—a process facilitated by E134, M230, and H232. D56 protonation also neutralizes the protein core. In-
coming Mn\(^{2+}\) displaces the \(\text{H}^+\) from D56 and interacts with N59, the A53 carbonyl, and M230, which bonds semi-covalently to selectively stabilize the transition metal substrate. H232 and E134 may stabilize the \(\text{H}^+\) in a transition state before it reaches D131, but they are not essential in other Nramp homologues for which neutralizing mutations at those positions preserve proton–metal cotransport behavior (Mackenzie et al., 2006; Ehrnförster et al., 2017). This \(\text{H}^+\) transfer thus redistributes the net added positive charge, such that both the metal-binding site and the salt-bridge network gain a +1 formal charge. The metal binding and proton transfer trigger the bulk conformational change to bring the transporter to the inward-facing state, in which the external vestibule closes and the cytosolic vestibule opens to allow eventual Mn\(^{2+}\) release (Bozzi et al., 2019). The proton is released to the cytosol, likely through the salt-bridge network where numerous conserved hydrophilic residues and ordered waters may aid its passage. Proton uniport, which we previously showed does not require bulk conformational change from outward-to-inward facing state (Bozzi et al., 2019), follows the same pathway through the salt-bridge network. Additional protonation states during this process are possible, but the available mutagenesis data do not enable predictions as to their identity. Future experiments and molecular dynamics simulations may elucidate additional stable or intermediate protonation states. Additional mechanistic details remain to be determined such as the extent of thermodynamic coupling between the metal and proton, how metal substrate binding initiates conformational change, and if and how this confor-
mational change affects \(\text{H}^+\) movement through the salt-bridge network.

For DraNramp, the distinction between proton–metal co-
transport (Mn\(^{2+}\), Fe\(^{2+}\), and Co\(^{2+}\)) and metal uniport (Zn\(^{2+}\) and Cd\(^{2+}\)) follows a familiar inorganic chemistry partition. The for-
mers cations have five, six, or seven valence d-electrons and
typically prefer a coordination arrangement with more electron-
donating ligands than do the latter metals which have a filled
d-shell (Barber-Zucker et al., 2017). Therefore, while D56 coordi-
nates Mn\(^{2+}\) in a bidentate manner requiring deprotonation
(Fig. 12 D) as we modeled for DraNramp’s outward-facing state (Bozzi et al., 2019), D56 may instead interact with Cd\(^{2+}\) only through its carbonyl oxygen and thus retain its proton (Fig. 12 C). The greater importance of M230 for Cd\(^{2+}\) than Mn\(^{2+}\) transport (Fig. 9, C and D; Bozzi et al., 2016a, 2019a) further supports differential binding properties for the two metals. Our Mn\(^{2+}\) and H\(^+\) cotransport results are consistent with in vitro findings with Mn\(^{2+}\) for E. coli Nramp (Ehrnförster et al., 2017). In con-
trast, the Cd\(^{2+}\) uniport we report contradicts in vivo results showing Cd\(^{2+}\) stimulates intracellular acidification in cells overexpressing E. coli Nramp (Courville et al., 2008), which has the same conserved salt-bridge network as DraNramp (Fig. 6). However, this study did not address the effects of Mn\(^{2+}\) or other metal substrates on intracellular pH. Furthermore, the inherent

for efflux with the same thermodynamic driving force
(Fig. 10).

To begin to understand how DraNramp’s structure enables
this noncanonical transport, we targeted the network of con-
served protonatable residues that stretches from the metal-
binding site to the cytosolic side of the membrane (Fig. 6).
Single point mutations within this network reduced the voltage
dependence (Fig. 7) and \(\Delta \text{pH}\) dependence (Fig. 8) of metal
transport rate, perturbed or eliminated metal-stimulated proton
transport (Fig. 8), altered metal selectivity (Fig. 9), and enabled
significant metal efflux to occur (Fig. 10). We summarize the
results of these mutagenesis experiments in Table S1 and pro-
pose the following model as one plausible mechanism for
Nramp manganese-proton cotransport (Fig. 12 A). D56 is first
complexity of such in vivo experiments compared with an artificial proteoliposome means that the observed intracellular pH changes were perhaps not due to flux through E. coli Nramp.

Intriguingly, perturbing either the metal-binding site or the adjoining salt-bridge network eliminates the H+ cotransport distinction between Cd2+ and Mn2+ (Fig. 8, C and D). Cd2+ stimulated H+ transport by the N59A and M230A variants, which suggests that in those variants D56 may compensate for the loss of a native metal ligand by interacting in a bidentate manner with Cd2+ and thus shedding a H+. In addition, mutations at residues ≥ 15 Å from bound M2+ also upset this distinction (i.e., both metals stimulate H+ transport by the R352A variant, while E124A and R353A shift to uniport of both metals), further underscoring the long-range influence of the salt-bridge network.

Overall, our experiments with different metals and point mutations indicate two distinct roles for protons in DraNramp’s mechanism: (i) ΔpH stimulation of metal transport rate, and (ii) metal stimulation of proton transport. Lower pH likely optimizes the metal-binding site via D56 protonation (Fig. 12 B), and mutations to residues in the immediate vicinity of D56 (M230, E134, H232) completely eliminate ΔpH dependence of transport.

**Figure 12. Proposed DraNramp proton-metal cotransport mechanism.**

(A) Proposed mechanism of proton-metal cotransport. Left: D56 protonation optimizes the metal-binding site via hydrogen bonding of D56 to the N59 carbonyl oxygen, providing a better metal-binding ligand than the amide nitrogen (as shown in B). Center: Metal substrate binds, displacing the D56 proton, which passes to D131, with H232 and E134 stabilizing a high-energy transition state and triggering bulk conformational change. Right: The proton exits to the cytosol via the TM3/TM9 salt-bridge network, while the metal is released into the cytosolic vestibule. (B) Detailed view of how protonation of D56 could alter the metal-binding site. (C and D) Cd2+ uniport perhaps occurs due to a monodentate interaction with D56, enabling proton retention. Bidentate binding of D56 by Mn2+ requires deprotonation, passing the proton to D131. See also Table S1.

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shown to reduce H+ uniport without impairing metal uptake. It is intriguing that evolution has retained such transport stoichiometries previously reported for yeast and mammalian Nramp homologues, which each transition is fully reversible, precise stoichiometry is required, and the prevailing ion gradients determine the directionality of net transport (Fig. 1). Effective symport thus requires tight coupling between the cosubstrates, which is implemented in transporters by the driving ions either structurally enabling binding of the primary substrate or mechanistically selectively stabilizing a certain conformational state (Perez and Ziegler, 2013; Rudnick, 2013). Indeed, for the LeuT amino acid transporter—a structural homologue of DraNramp—substrate binding depends on two bound Na+ ions (Erlendsson et al., 2017): one Na+ stabilizes the outward-open conformation (Claxton et al., 2010; Tavoulari et al., 2016) while a second Na+ binds the transported amino acid’s carboxylate group (Yamashita et al., 2005).

DraNramp proton-metal cotransport deviates from basic principles of canonical symport. First, while Mn2+ was co-transported with H+, uncoupled H+ flux occurs readily in the absence of metal (Fig. 5), which may result in the variable cotransport stoichiometries previously reported for yeast and mammalian Nramp homologues (Chen et al., 1999; Mackenzie et al., 2006, 2007). These “futile cycles” are energetically wasteful, depleting ΔΨ and ΔpH without assisting in the uptake of the primary substrate. It is intriguing that evolution has retained such a thermodynamic cost as a general feature of the Nramp family, especially as simple tweaks near the salt-bridge network were shown to reduce H+ uniport without impairing metal uptake (Nevo and Nelson, 2004). Second, because of their like charges it is energetically unfavorable for the two substrates to directly interact in the binding site during the transport process. Indeed, our results suggest that H+ transport and Mn2+ binding may actually become competitive processes under some conditions, underscoring the cosubstrate’s imperfect synergy (Fig. 4). DraNramp’s salt-bridge network may have evolved as a way of spatially separating the cationic metals and proton during the conformational change process. Thus, DraNramp may rely on a longer-range allosteric structural connection between the cosubstrates rather than a stable direct interaction like that seen in LeuT (Yamashita et al., 2005).

Outside the Nramp family, proton–metal cotransport was demonstrated for the E. coli Zn2+ transporter ZnT6 (Gati et al., 2017), which belongs to the CorA metal ion transporter family, and the mouse Zn2+ transporter ZIP4 (Hoch and Sekler, 2018), a member of the Zrt/Irt-like protein (ZIP) family. In addition, proton–metal antiport was observed for a second E. coli Zn2+ transporter ZitB (Chao and Fu, 2004) and the human Zn2+ transporter ZnT5 (Ohana et al., 2009), both members of the metalidurans Co2+, Zn2+, and Cd2+ transporter CcA (Nies, 1995) from the heavy metal efflux resistance-nodulation-cell division (HME-RND) family. The ability to mechanistically intertwine proton and metal transport thus appears to have evolved independently in several different protein families with diverse structures, although the lack of details regarding how coupling is enforced in most cases renders it difficult to assess whether any mechanistic similarities exist.

The canonical model for secondary transport posits a cycle in which each transition is fully reversible, precise stoichiometry is maintained, and the prevailing ion gradients determine the directionality of net transport (Fig. 1). Effective symport thus requires tight coupling between the cosubstrates, which is implemented in transporters by the driving ions either structurally enabling binding of the primary substrate or mechanistically selectively stabilizing a certain conformational state (Perez and Ziegler, 2013; Rudnick, 2013). Indeed, for the LeuT amino acid transporter—a structural homologue of DraNramp—substrate binding depends on two bound Na+ ions (Erlendsson et al., 2017): one Na+ stabilizes the outward-open conformation (Claxton et al., 2010; Tavoulari et al., 2016) while a second Na+ binds the transported amino acid’s carboxylate group (Yamashita et al., 2005).

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Our results also demonstrate a kinetic role for the physiological membrane potential in DraNramp metal transport (Fig. 2 and 4). Although such voltage dependence may be a diffuse property for a transport protein, our mutagenesis data show that neutralizing mutations within the conserved salt-bridge network lining DraNramp’s ion transport routes alter the voltage dependence and increase transport at lower magnitude ΔΨ (Fig. 7). Thus, this Nramp-specific structural feature may impart a voltage-sensitive rate-limiting step to the transport process, although the details of this phenomenon remain to be determined. Of note, as the effects of ΔΨ, pH, and ΔpH are distinct for different metals, these properties likely affect steps in the transport cycle where the metal is bound, and the mechanistic details may thus vary for different metal substrates.

DraNramp’s noncanonical proton–metal cotransport and strong voltage dependence may serve to make metal import essentially kinetically irreversible. Indeed, no Mn2+ transport occurs in the absence of a negative ΔΨ (Fig. 2; cations leaving the cell would experience an unfavorable [inside negative] ΔΨ). Furthermore, inside-out transporters—even with a favorable ΔΨ—fail to efficiently import Mn2+ into liposomes down a large concentration gradient (Fig. 10). The inward-to-outward metal-bound transition is thus essentially kinetically forbidden in the WT protein under physiological conditions. Strikingly, point mutations to the salt-bridge network that perturb voltage dependence, ΔΨ dependence, and/or proton cotransport evade these restrictions, such that these protein variants behave more like directionally unbiased uniporters (Fig. 10). The unique features in DraNramp’s structure may therefore have evolved to enforce a transport mechanism that, though energetically wasteful due to its propensity for proton uniport, is optimally adapted to the cellular context with robust safeguards against the back transport of precious intracellular metal stores.

Data availability
The raw biochemical data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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