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► **To cite this version:**

Yu Ogawa, Jean-Luc Putaux, Yoshiharu Nishiyama. Crystallography of polysaccharides: Current state and challenges. *Current Opinion in Chemical Biology*, 2022, 70, pp.102183. 10.1016/j.cbpa.2022.102183 . hal-03714972

**HAL Id: hal-03714972**

**<https://cnrs.hal.science/hal-03714972>**

Submitted on 6 Aug 2022

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# 1 **Crystallography of polysaccharides: Current state and challenges.**

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7

## 8 **Abstract**

9 Polysaccharides are the most abundant class of biopolymers, holding an important place in  
10 biological systems and sustainable material development. Their spatial organization and  
11 intra- and intermolecular interactions are thus of great interest. However, conventional  
12 single crystal crystallography is not applicable since polysaccharides crystallize only into tiny  
13 crystals. Several crystallographic methods have been developed to extract atomic-resolution  
14 structural information from polysaccharide crystals. Small-probe single crystal  
15 diffractometry, high-resolution fiber diffraction and powder diffraction combined with  
16 molecular modeling brought new insights from various types of polysaccharide crystals, and  
17 led to many high-resolution crystal structures over the past two decades. Current challenges  
18 lie in the analysis of disorder and defects by further integrating molecular modeling  
19 methods for low-resolution diffraction data.

20

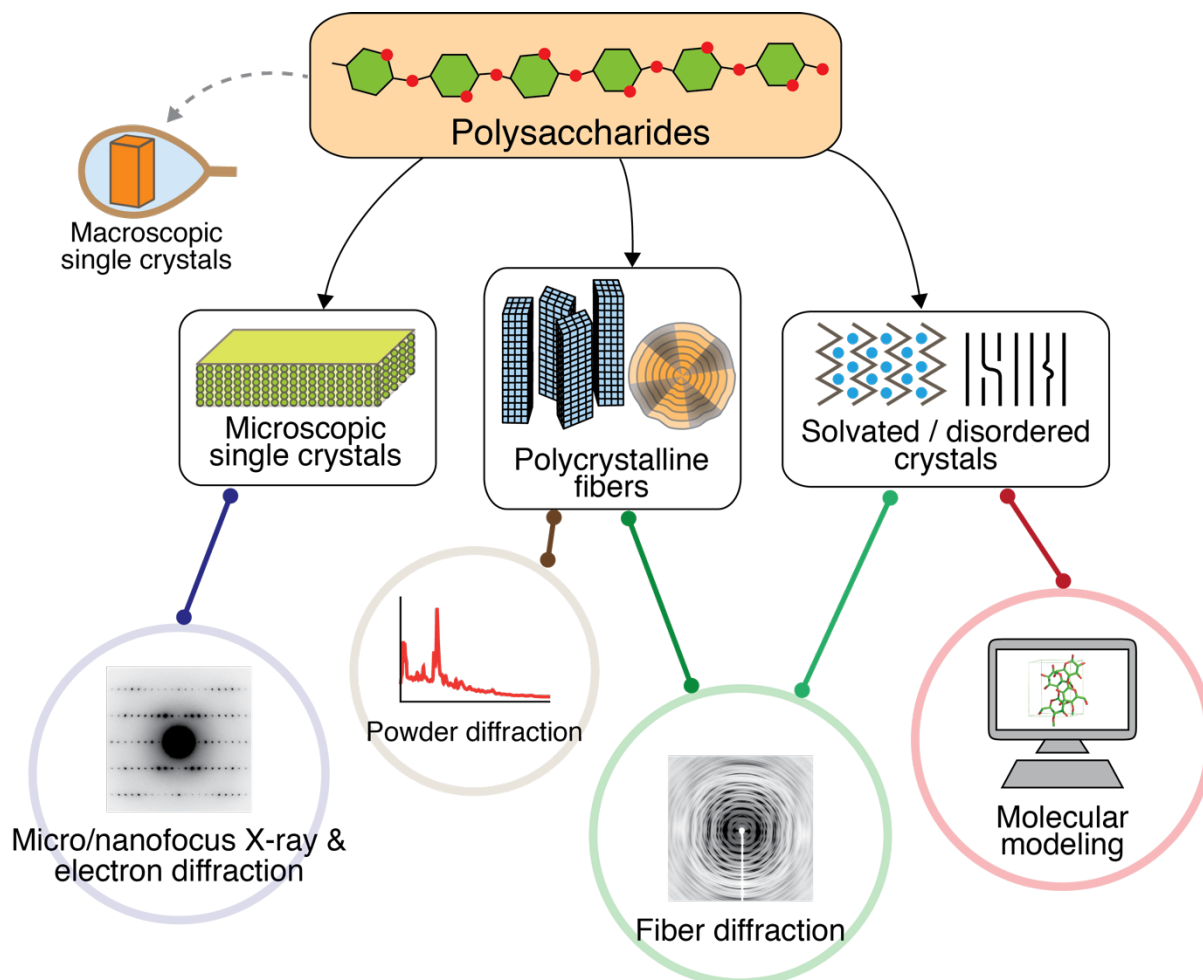
21 **Keywords:** Polysaccharides, Crystallography, Fiber diffraction, Electron diffraction

22

## 23 **Introduction**

24 The knowledge of the spatial arrangement of molecules is fundamental to a detail  
25 understanding of the properties and molecular interactions in materials and biological  
26 systems. Single crystal analysis using millimeter-sized crystallites is a standard tool to  
27 analyze such structures at atomic or subatomic resolution. However, in many practical  
28 systems, single crystals of the corresponding structure are not available. Polysaccharides,  
29 the most abundant biopolymers on Earth, are one of such systems that do not yield  
30 macroscopic single crystals but polycrystalline aggregates of smaller crystallites. This  
31 polycrystalline nature has posed a challenge and led to methodological developments in the  
32 structural determination of polysaccharide crystals. In this article, we review the recent

33 advances in the crystallography of polysaccharides in their native or recrystallized state (Fig.  
 34 1). In particular, we will focus on the crystallographic methods for three different sample  
 35 forms of polysaccharides, namely polycrystalline fibers, microscopic single crystals and  
 36 crystalline powders. Finally, we will discuss the current challenges in the field of  
 37 polysaccharide crystallography.



38

**Figure 1.** General scheme of polysaccharide crystallography. Polysaccharides are not crystallized into macroscopic single crystals but yield microscopic crystals with different geometries and features. Several crystallographic methods are available for structure determination of such small polysaccharide crystals.

39

#### 40 Polysaccharides and their crystallinity

41 Polysaccharides are a class of molecules constituted of carbohydrate units (sugars) linked  
 42 via glycosidic linkages. Potentially, the variety in molecular structures is huge, because each  
 43 sugar can link at different positions, with two possible anomeric configurations, and it can  
 44 contain different monomer sequences [1]. However, in terms of biomass quantity, relatively

45 simple homopolymers, such as cellulose and chitin, are dominant. Those are also the  
46 molecules that tend to crystallize. Such carbohydrate crystals provide rich experimental  
47 information about the details of molecular packing. In recent years, they have attracted  
48 increasing attention as renewable resources for materials, thanks to their abundance,  
49 renewability, biocompatibility, low toxicity, and interesting material properties.

50 Polysaccharides are traditionally categorized into two groups based on their *in vivo*  
51 functionality, namely structural and storage polysaccharides. The former includes cellulose  
52 [2] and chitin [3]. The structural polysaccharides confer the mechanical strength and  
53 support to biological tissues. For instance, cellulose is the primary load-bearing material in  
54 plant cell walls, and chitin is a structural component in crustacean/insect exoskeletons and  
55 fungal cell walls. The storage polysaccharides, on the other hand, serve as the energy  
56 storage in cells. Its representative examples are starch [4],  $\beta$ -1,3-glucan (paramylon) [5], and  
57 inulin [6] in plants, and glycogen in animals and fungi [7]. Mannan has a dual nature as it can  
58 be found both a structural and storage polysaccharide [8]. For instance,  
59 galactoglucomannans are one of the main structural components in soft wood cell walls,  
60 while linear mannans are found as energy storage in plant seeds such as ivory nuts. The  
61 polysaccharides in the extracellular matrix, such as hyaluronic acid, possess specific  
62 functionalities (e.g. lubricants in the joints) and are not categorized into either of the two  
63 traditional groups [9].

64 In nature, structural polysaccharides often occur as fibrous objects in which the chains  
65 are aligned along the long axis of the molecular assemblies. In particular, cellulose and chitin  
66 are biosynthesized into crystalline nanofibrils. Other structural polysaccharides are found  
67 naturally in amorphous matrices and sometimes associate with other fibrous components  
68 (e.g. hemicelluloses) [10]. The native state of the storage polysaccharides can vary. For  
69 instance, paramylon and starch are biosynthesized in plant cells as several micrometer-large  
70 semicrystalline granules [4], while glycogen is an amorphous nanoparticle [7].

71 Regardless of the *in vivo* functionality, most linear polysaccharides have a strong  
72 crystallization tendency. This characteristic has been exploited to prepare crystalline  
73 specimens suitable for the crystallographic analysis as described below. Furthermore,  
74 polysaccharides often exhibit polymorphism. Different crystalline allomorphs can be  
75 obtained under different *in vitro* crystallization conditions. The polymorphism also occurs in  
76 natural polysaccharide crystals (e.g. cellulose I $\alpha$  and I $\beta$ ,  $\alpha$ - and  $\beta$ -chitin) [3,11].

77

## 78 **Crystallographic methods for polysaccharides in different geometries**

79 Conventional single crystal analysis is not applicable to the structural determination of  
80 polysaccharides due to the lack of availability of their macroscopic crystals. Several other  
81 crystallographic methods are available for microscopic polysaccharide crystals. Each of them  
82 is applicable only to specific sample geometries as described below.

83

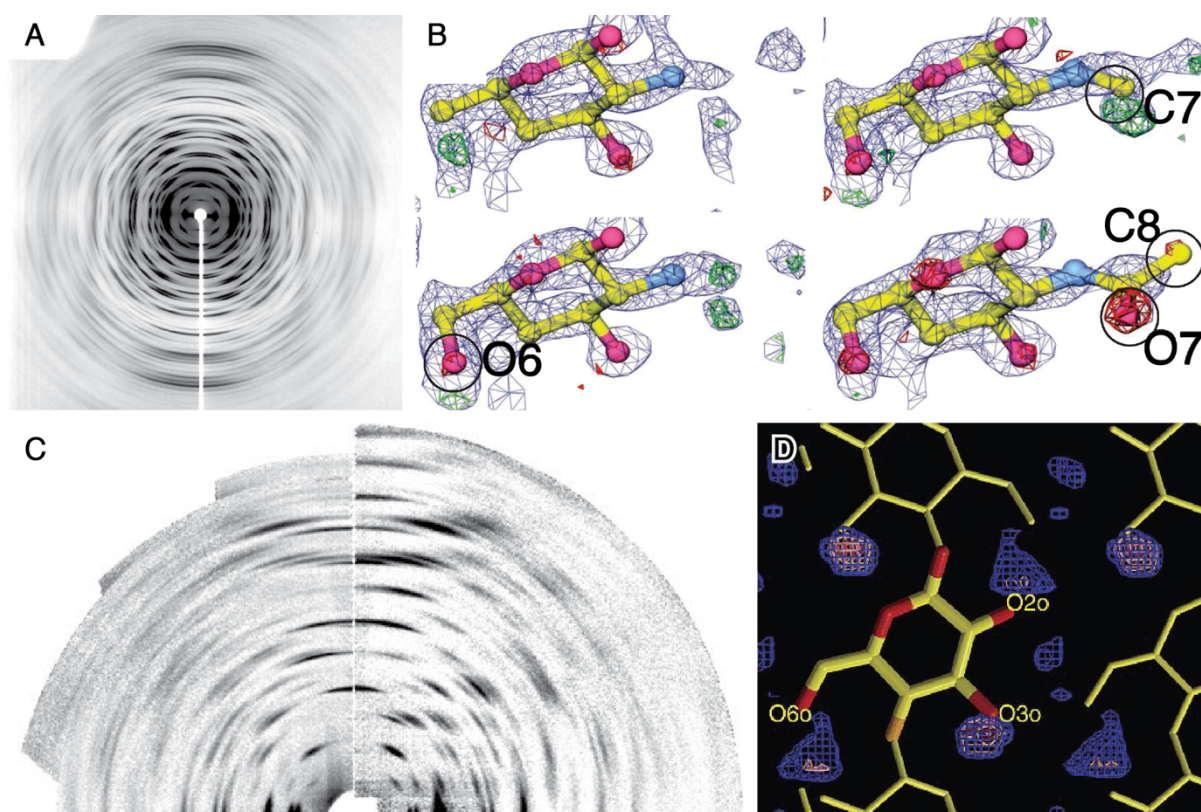
### 84 **Fibrous crystals**

85 Polycrystalline fibrous assemblies yield robust and reproducible fiber diffraction patterns  
86 that contain invaluable structural information. One famous example is the X-ray fiber  
87 diffraction pattern of DNA that led to the model of its helical structure (Nobel prize 1962)  
88 through a trial-and-error model building. Fibrous polysaccharides have been providing such  
89 fiber diffraction patterns since over a century [12]. The prerequisite of the fiber diffraction  
90 analysis is the cylindrical symmetry of the crystallites along the fiber axis. While there are  
91 some specimens that naturally possess individual crystallites in that symmetry (e.g.  
92 cellulosic fibers), there are many different methods reported to prepare such fibrous  
93 specimens from non-oriented polysaccharide crystallites. Examples include uniaxial  
94 orientation of fibrous nanocrystals in a soft matrix [13,14] and recrystallization of stretched  
95 films of polysaccharides [15]. In addition, crystalline domains in spherulites are also locally  
96 arranged in a cylindrical symmetry. They thus provide fiber diffraction patterns when  
97 probed at their periphery with small X-ray beams [16]. Fiber diffraction patterns were  
98 successfully collected from large starch granules using microfocus X-ray beams [17,18].

99 In the 1960-80s, crystal structures were refined based on *a priori* constraints such as  
100 interatomic distances and bond angles in the molecules (cf. linked-atom least square  
101 refinement, or LALS). This led to a series of structural models of polysaccharide crystals with  
102 limited data available at the time [19–22]. These early structures are still reliable as  
103 approximations, largely due to the low degree of freedom of polysaccharides in the dry  
104 unsolvated crystalline state, but sometimes fail to distinguish chain polarities, for example  
105 [23].

106 In the late 1990s, highly resolved fiber diffraction patterns became available with  
107 synchrotron X-ray sources becoming accessible, and more significantly large-area detection  
108 systems with high-spatial resolution and dynamic range (Fig. 2A). They have resulted in a

109 series of atomic-resolution crystal structures of cellulose [24–28] and chitin [29–31]  
110 allomorphs as well as chitosan [32,33]. Unlike the previous structures, they were refined  
111 without strong geometric constraints. The positions of flexible side groups such as  
112 hydroxymethyl groups were determined based directly on Fourier maps (Fig. 2B). In some  
113 cases, hydroxy hydrogen positions were also refined based on neutron fiber diffraction  
114 analyses coupled with intracrystalline deuteration (Fig. 2C,D) [14,25–27,33,34]. The  
115 localization of hydrogen atoms allowed the unambiguous determination of the hydrogen  
116 bonding networks in the crystal structures. These high-resolution fiber diffraction structures  
117 serve as the structural basis in the various research fields of carbohydrate science, from  
118 materials science to glycobiology.



119

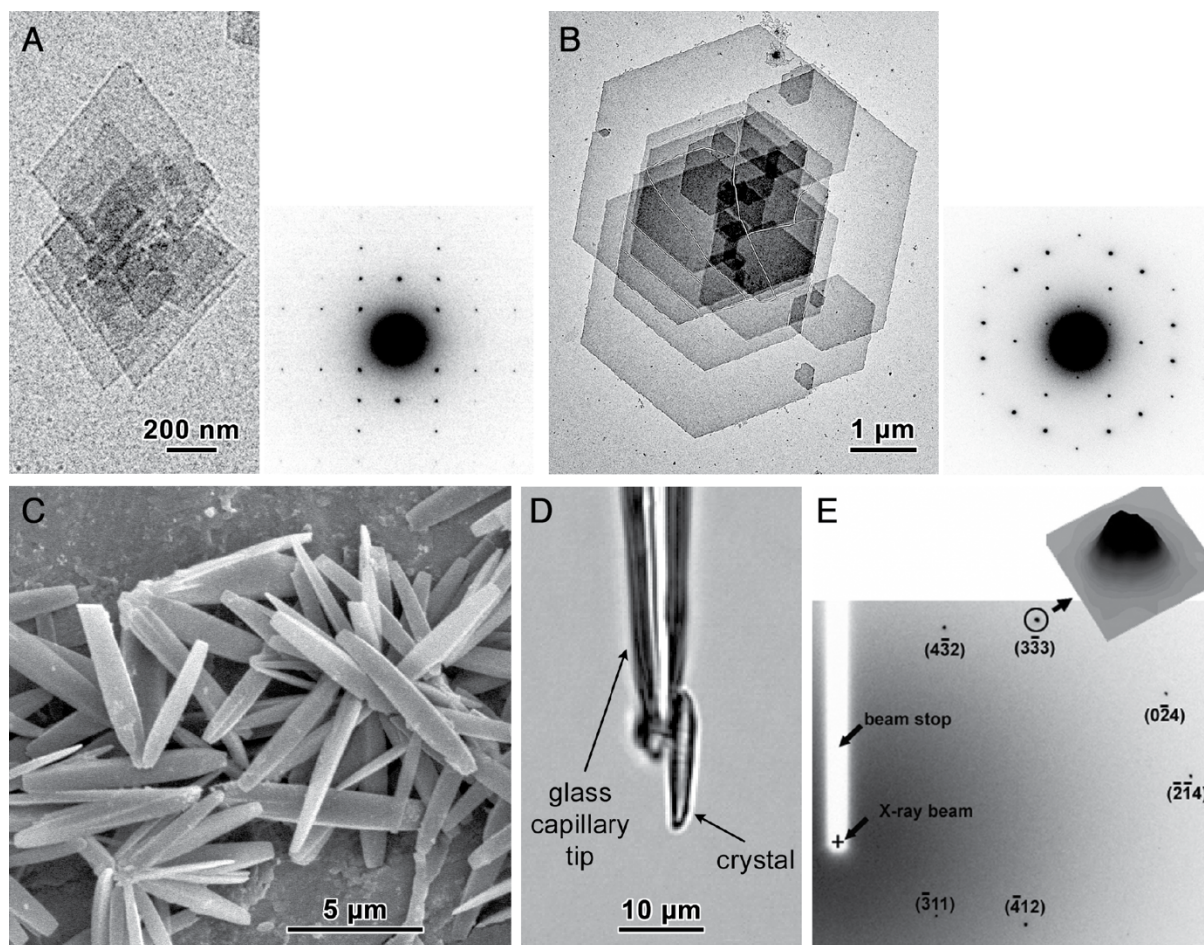
**Figure 2.** Fiber diffraction analysis of polysaccharide crystals. (A) X-ray fiber diffraction pattern of anhydrous  $\beta$ -chitin with a resolution of 1 Å. (B) Fourier OMIT map analysis of anhydrous  $\beta$ -chitin based on the intensity data extracted from the diffraction pattern shown in (A). Acetamide side chain structure is refined based on the Fourier maps. Adapted with permission from Nishiyama et al. [28] (C) Neutron fiber diffraction pattern of hydrogenated (left) and deuterated (right) cellulose I $\beta$ . (D) Fourier OMIT map analysis of cellulose I $\beta$  based on the intensity data extracted from the diffraction patterns shown in (C). The density peaks indicate the positions of deuterium. Adapted with permission from Nishiyama et al. [24]

120

## 121 **Microscopic single crystals**

122       When polysaccharides are crystallized into microscopic single crystals, typically with at  
123 least one dimension larger than a few hundreds of nanometers, single crystal  
124 crystallography is applicable. Such crystals can be prepared by *in vitro* crystallization. In  
125 many cases, *in vitro* crystallization of linear polysaccharides results in thin lamellar crystals  
126 with a thickness of a few to tens of nanometers, suitable for electron diffraction  
127 experiments (Fig. 3A,B) [35,36]. The acquisition of high-resolution electron diffraction data  
128 of polysaccharide crystals is challenging due to their intrinsic radiation sensitivity. Despite  
129 this challenge, several electron crystal structures of polysaccharides have been solved in the  
130 1980-90s, including those of mannan [37], inulin [38], A-amylose[39] and anhydrous  
131 chitosan [40]. More recently, the structure of polysaccharide-solvent complexes (e.g. V-  
132 amylose) has been solved at near atomic resolution based on electron diffraction  
133 experiments carried out under cryogenic condition [41–43]. These crystallographic analyses  
134 were mostly based on single two-dimensional diffraction patterns recorded with the  
135 electron beam perpendicular to the lamellar plane, *i.e.*, the crystals were thus treated as 2D  
136 arrays of polysaccharide molecules. In some cases, three-dimensional diffraction data could  
137 be collected by rotating the crystals along selected low-index crystallographic axes  
138 [38,39,44]. Since the chain axes of polysaccharides are generally perpendicular to the  
139 lamellar plane, the analysis of base-plane diffraction data can lead to inaccurate structural  
140 refinement along the chain direction, as was demonstrated, for instance, by comparing X-  
141 ray and electron structures of anhydrous chitosan [32]. The implementation of 3D electron  
142 crystallography methods, such as microbeam electron diffraction (microED), is expected to  
143 overcome this problem [45]. The 3D ED methods enable the collection of diffraction data  
144 during sample rotation, thus covering a large reciprocal space volume.





145

**Figure 3.** Single crystal analysis of polysaccharides. (A,B) Transmission electron micrographs and corresponding electron diffraction patterns of lamellar crystals of mannan I (A) (adapted from Grimaud et al. [35] with permission) and V-amylose inclusion complex with myristic acid (B) [38]. (C) Scanning electron micrograph of A-amylose single crystals. (D) A single crystal mounted on a tip of glass capillary for microfocus X-ray diffraction measurement. (E) An example of diffraction diagram collected from one A-amylose single crystal using microfocused X-rays (reproduced from Popov et al. [45] with permission).

146

147 When polysaccharides grow into larger 3D crystals, X-ray single crystal analysis can be  
 148 used based on micro- or nanofocus X-ray beams. To date, the only example is the crystal  
 149 structure of A-amylose with 1.3 Å resolution data using acicular single crystals probed by a  
 150 synchrotron X-ray microbeam [46]. Similarly to electron diffraction experiments, the  
 151 radiation damage becomes significant when using microfocus X-rays [47]. In this analysis,  
 152 the complete dataset was obtained by merging data from different crystals to limit the  
 153 detrimental effects of radiation damage. Despite being powerful and robust, the method is



154 underused largely due to the lack of availability of micron-sized 3D crystals and the  
155 accessibility to microdiffraction setups available only at synchrotron beamlines.

156

### 157 **Crystalline powders**

158 Fiber X-ray and single crystal electron diffraction techniques are not always available in  
159 carbohydrate chemistry laboratories. Powder X-ray diffraction measurement using a  
160 standard diffractometer is often the primary option for structural characterization. This  
161 situation resulted in many powder diffraction patterns of polysaccharide crystals in the  
162 literature whose structures are not determined so far [5,48]. Such powder diffraction  
163 patterns contain useful structural information, but the analysis is not straightforward. For an  
164 unknown structure, the unit cell determination, in particular indexing, is challenging partly  
165 due to the limited crystallite size that contributes to the line broadening and peak overlaps.  
166 Combining single-crystal or fiber methods is crucial at this step. For instance, electron  
167 diffraction has played a key role in the unit cell determination of polysaccharide crystals as  
168 demonstrated in the unambiguous identification of unit cells of two native cellulose  
169 allomorphs [11]. A similar approach can be taken for further structural investigation of these  
170 polysaccharide crystals.

171

### 172 **Molecular simulation as a complementary technique**

173 The use of molecular modelling, in particular force-field methods, is common practice in  
174 the protein X-ray structure refinement process since the 1990s. Examples of such methods  
175 include simulated annealing [49] and ensemble refinement (e.g. Phenix program) [50]. It  
176 was used to overcome the problem of many-minima that hinders the search of the “most  
177 likely” model. This approach has been extended to neutron and electron diffraction analyses  
178 as well as cryogenic electron microscopy (cryoEM) structures. However, so far, it has not  
179 been integrated into the atomic-resolution fiber diffraction analysis and thus hardly used in  
180 the structure refinement of polysaccharide crystals.

181 In recent years, the force-field-based molecular dynamics (MD) simulations and  
182 periodic density functional theory (DFT) calculations have been utilized to analyze the  
183 hydrogen bonding patterns in cellulose allomorphs and anhydrous chitosan [33,51]. This  
184 approach has provided useful insights into the geometry of hydrogen bonds in

185 polysaccharide structures and proved the effectiveness of computational methods in  
186 complementing the neutron fiber diffraction analysis.

187

### 188 **Crystallographic analysis of biological systems**

189 In addition to information about the molecular arrangement in space, the  
190 crystallographic information can provide insights into the biosynthesis mechanisms of  
191 natural polysaccharide crystals. A texture analysis of *Valonia* cell wall based on fiber  
192 diffraction revealed the existence of microfibrils running in opposite sense, suggesting a  
193 movement of cellulose synthetic complex on the cell membrane [52]. A similar texture  
194 analysis was performed on a housing tube of deep-sea tubeworm. The unipolar orientation  
195 of chitin microfibrils in the tube implied the direct connection between the chitin secretion  
196 and the motion of the worm [53].

197 Conversely, scientific discoveries regarding biosynthetic and/or biodegradation  
198 mechanisms have advanced our understanding of polysaccharide crystal structure. For  
199 instance, the directionality of cellulose and chitin molecules in the unit cells were  
200 experimentally determined based on the electron diffraction measurements and the  
201 knowledge of the chain elongation, by addition of monomers to the non-reducing end of the  
202 existing chain [54,55].

203

### 204 **Current challenges and future directions in polysaccharide crystallography**

205 Over the last two decades, a series of high-resolution crystal structures of  
206 polysaccharides were reported based on highly resolved X-ray/neutron fiber diffraction  
207 data. This led to the detailed understanding of molecular interactions in cellulose  
208 allomorphs and their analogues. However, these reliable crystal structures are mostly those  
209 of crystals exhibiting a high-symmetry and a low degree of freedom. The samples are also  
210 limited to the fibrous crystalline assemblies with large individual crystallite size. Many  
211 crystalline polysaccharides do not fall into this specific category. Further methodological  
212 developments are expected in the field of polysaccharide crystallography to tackle more  
213 complex and yet relevant crystal structures.

214 One of such challenging structures is that of polysaccharide-solvent crystalline  
215 complexes. These crystallosolvates are of great interest because they provide clues for the  
216 understanding of solute-solvent interactions that govern the processing of materials. The

217 incorporation of guest molecules is also of interest to understand and design the  
218 functionality of materials such as drug delivery or separation. Although several structures of  
219 relatively simple crystallosolvates, such as cellulose-amine complexes, have been reported  
220 [56,57], many crystallosolvates with larger and more complex guest molecules are yet to be  
221 studied. Improved experimental data have become available for many such structures in  
222 recent years [16,58,59]. They are, however, not yet producing reliable molecular models  
223 due to the high degree of freedom and dynamic nature of the system and the lack of an  
224 established method to explore all the potential molecular arrangements. In addition, some  
225 parts of the structure such as guest molecules can adopt non-crystallographic positions, and  
226 there are cases for which the crystal symmetry is only due to the spatial and time average.  
227 For instance, in the chitin-hydrazine complex, the molecular dynamics simulation showed  
228 that the positions of two nitrogen atoms were not fixed but interchangeable at room  
229 temperature [60]. To investigate the large conformational space and the dynamic aspects of  
230 the structures and the molecular interactions, it is necessary to fully integrate the molecular  
231 modelling methods into the fiber diffraction analysis. Both force-field and *ab initio* methods  
232 are useful for investigating different aspects of such dynamical structures as demonstrated  
233 in the case of the chitin-hydrazine complex [60].

234 The full implementation of molecular modelling in the fiber diffraction method would  
235 benefit structural analysis of polysaccharide crystals with defects and disorders. For  
236 instance, many practical cellulosic materials are composed of crystallites much smaller than  
237 model cellulose crystals used in the crystallographic analyses. These smaller crystals  
238 generally contain more disorder and defects. While small or disordered crystals would not  
239 yield high-resolution diffraction data, their fiber diffraction patterns provide rich structural  
240 information [61]. Quantitative comparison of the experimental diffraction patterns and  
241 those predicted from molecular simulations should shed light on the molecular details of  
242 the disordered systems.

243

#### 244 **Declaration of competing interest**

245 The authors declare that they have no competing financial interest or personal  
246 relationships that influence the work reported in this paper.

247

#### 248 **Acknowledgements**

249 The authors acknowledge Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR) for the financial  
250 support as part of the ECoCar project (grant number: ANR-21-CE29-0016-1).

251

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253 \* of special interest

254 \*\* of outstanding interest

255

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