

Preface

The single-channel recording technique has reached the status of a routine method, and the view that conductance changes in biological membranes are caused by the openings and closings of ion channels is now almost universally accepted. The most convincing early evidence for channels mediating flow of ions across biological membranes was provided in 1972 by Bernard Katz and Ricardo Miledi through the observation of membrane noise and their estimate of the size of the underlying “elementary event.” The patch-clamp method has confirmed their view directly. In 1993, the work of Nigel Unwin permitted a first visual glance through an ion channel in a biological membrane.

In the sense we use it in this book, the concept and the word *Kanal* was used first by the Austrian physiologist Ernst Brücke in 1843 to describe his view of the mechanism of transport of solutes (via water-filled capillary tubes) through a biological membrane separating two fluids. Patch-clamp recording and molecular cloning of channel genes have revealed an enormous diversity of ion channels. As has been found for other proteins, ion channels fall into different families that share common functional properties. Bertil Hille speculated that the very diverse channel subtypes may have evolved from prototypical channels (or even from an “*Ur-Kanal*”). Neither the ion selectivity nor the gating mechanism nor amino acid sequence motifs of the putative channel ancestors are known. Also, the evolutionary relationships between channel families are just emerging. On the other hand, the evolution of the word channel is fairly straightforward to derive (Fig. 1).

The words *channel* (English), *canal* (French), *Kanal* (German), or *canale* (Italian) derive from Latin *canalis* meaning a small water-filled tube or pipe. It is derived from the Greek word *κάννα*, which also means cane, tube, or pipe. *Κάννα* is a loan-word that was adopted by the Greeks from the Semitic word *qanû*, used likewise by the Phoenicians. This root is preserved, for example, in biblical Hebrew as *קנה*. The word *qanû* is of Assyro-Babylonian origin and means, among other things, a pipe made from reed. The Sumerian equivalent of *qanû* is *gi*, which designates the common and the giant reed growing in Mesopotamia and in the Near East and which is, in systematic botany, referred to as *Phragmites australis* and *Arundo donax* L. In early Sumerian cuneiform writing the shape of the reed (Fig. 2) is preserved. It is interesting to note that the same word *κάννα* is also the root of such common words as canon or canonical, meaning a set of rules that have reached the status of official truth.



Figure 1. Evolution of the word channel from Sumerogram *gi*.

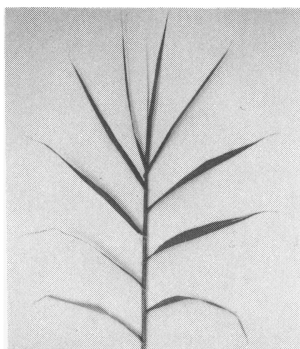


Figure 2. Photograph of giant reed (*Arundo donax* L.).

Presumably in ancient times tubes made from this reed were used to suck or expel water and solutes between different reservoirs. Until the present day, *Arundo donax* tubes have been used for making water pipes for houses in the Near East.

Canalis was originally the word for devices used to direct the flow of water and solutes and was only later replaced in western Europe by the French words pipe and pipette. This book is about both channels and pipettes, since the essence of patch clamping is the attempt to join a channel to a pipette in order to measure the flow of solutes through both.

Patch pipettes have become more useful than originally thought; i.e., they are useful not only for measuring flow of ions through channels. In this new edition of *Single-Channel Recording*, we include a number of new chapters that describe techniques that rely on the use of pipettes to study cellular mechanisms that are only indirectly related to single ion channels.

In our opinion some important new applications have developed since the first edition of the “blue book”:

- Capacitance measurements allowing the detection of single fusion events of secretory vesicles.
- Single-cell PCR measurements allowing detection of mRNA molecules in single cells by combining patch-clamp methods with molecular biology methods.
- Whole-cell recording from neurons in brain slices in combination with imaging techniques.
- Atomic force microscopy of cells and membranes attached to glass pipettes in the hope of allowing the detection of the structure of molecules in membranes.

The new edition therefore includes new chapters that give accounts of these wider applications. Also, three introductory chapters were added, which are intended to introduce the newcomer to patch clamping and to provide access to the vast literature on patch-clamp technology that has accumulated in the meantime. We do not try to cover all aspects of the technique, since quite recent reviews handling the different areas are available, such as *Methods in Enzymology*, Vol. 207, *The Plymouth Workshop Handbook* (D. C. Ogden, ed., Academic Press) and the *Axon Guide* (distributed by Axon Instruments).

We would like to thank our colleagues who contributed chapters to the new edition and also Prof. Waetzoldt and Dr. Kramer of Heidelberg University and Prof. Dani Dagan from the Technion for their help in tracing the origin of the word channel.

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