Two-photon characterisation of long-Stokes-shift dye ATTO 490LS for single-laser multicolour imaging

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Abstract

Long-Stokes-shift fluorophores enable high sensitivity and multiplexed imaging with single-wavelength excitation. Under single-photon illumination ATTO 490LS exhibits a 165-nm Stokes shift, but its two-photon properties remain uncharacterised. Emission and excitation spectral analyses of ATTO 490LS in ex vivo *Drosophila melanogaster* brains identified two-photon excitation sensitivity at 940 nm, with peak emission at 640 nm. We demonstrate successful duplexed imaging of ATTO 490LS alongside Alexa Fluor 488 using a single 920-nm fibre laser and dual photomultiplier tubes, enabling distinct measurement of red and green fluorescence signals. These findings establish ATTO 490LS as suitable for multicolour two-photon microscopy with single-laser systems.

Figure

Figure 1. ATTO 490LS is excited by a 920 nm laser and is suitable for single-laser multicolour two-photon imaging.

(A) Schematic diagram of the experimental workflow. **(B)** Representative image of *elav-Gal4>UAS-TID-Dlg1* fly brain, with ATTO 490LS staining at 780 nm excitation during the excitation scan. Scale bar = 100 μm. **(B′)** The identical experiment as **B**, but with no staining. **(C)** Normalised excitation spectrum of ATTO 490LS (red line) over 680 nm to 1200 nm compared with the emission intensity from an unlabelled brain (grey dashed line). Emission intensity from 680–740nm excitation is almost entirely attributed to autofluorescence. Emission intensity of ATTO 490LS peaks at 780 nm, 940 nm, and 1040 nm excitation, with normalised mean fluorescence intensities of 79.1, 11.1, and 10.71

(arbitrary units) respectively. Insert shows an enlarged view of the emission peaks at 940 nm and

1040 nm, which are 3–4-fold higher than the baseline emission intensity. **(D)** Normalised emission

spectra of ATTO 490LS over 500 nm to 780 nm, at 780 nm (blue line), 920 nm (green line), 940 nm

(orange line), and 1040 nm (burgundy line) excitation. Excitation at all four tested wavelengths gives

emission peaks at 640 nm, with normalised mean fluorescence intensities of 200.0, 7.5, 28.1, and

24.1 (arbitrary units) respectively. **(E)** Respective images at various emission wavelengths of an

ATTO 490LS-stained *elav-Gal4>UAS-TID-Dlg1* brain from the 920 nm excitation emission scan.

Scale bar = 100 μm. **(F–F″)** Maximum intensity projection images of an ATTO 490LS- and Alexa Fluor

488-coupled-anti-c-Myc tag antibody-stained *elav-Gal4>UAS-TID-Dlg1* brain. Both fluorophores

were simultaneously excited by the 920 nm laser at 3% power (30 mW). Detection of **(F)** ATTO

490LS signals with the red-filtered PMT at 1% gain, **(F′)** detection of Alexa Fluor 488 signals with the

green-filtered PMT at 5% gain, and **(F″)** merged signals. Magenta arrowheads mark the ellipsoid

body, an example structure labelled here only by ATTO 490LS. Green arrowheads mark the γ-lobe of

the mushroom body, an example structure labelled here only by Alexa Fluor 488. White arrowheads

mark the α-lobe of the mushroom body, an example structure double-labelled here by both ATTO

490LS and Alexa 490LS. Scale bar = 100 μm.

Description

A Stokes shift refers to the difference in wavelength between maximum absorption and maximum emission of a fluorophore (Stokes, 1852). A long Stokes shift describes when a fluorescent molecule is excitable by a relatively short wavelength, but emits at a much longer wavelength due to a loss of energy following excitation (Lakowicz, 2001; Valeur, 2001). This can be valuable in fluorescence microscopy, as it reduces overlap between excitation and emission spectra, thereby minimising noise from scattered excitation light and improving detection sensitivity (Sednev et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2024).

Long-Stokes-shift fluorophores can also be suitable for multicolour imaging on microscope systems that are limited to a single laser. A long-Stokes-shift dye can be combined with another fluorophore with the same or a similar excitation profile, but give a completely different emission spectrum, thus making the two dyes distinguishable during image collection (Likhotkin et al., 2023). ATTO 490LS (ATTO-TEC GmbH) is an example of a red-fluorescing long-Stokes-shift dye, with a reported single-photon excitation wavelength of 496 nm and emission wavelength of 661 nm (Stokes shift of 165 nm). It has been used in conjunction with other common dyes such as ATTO 488, ATTO 514, Alexa Fluor 488, 594, and 647 (Reitz et al., 2021).

We are interested in utilising a long-Stokes-shift fluorophore for in vivo *Drosophila* brain two-photon imaging alongside genetically encoded indicators, for example GCaMP, which fluoresce green with an emission peak wavelength of 510 nm (Nakai et al., 2001; Zhang et al., 2023) when excited by, for example, a 920 nm ultrashort pulse laser. Under single-photon conditions, ATTO 490LS has a similar excitation peak to GFP and its derived sensors like the GCaMPs, making ATTO 490LS a potential reference dye during neuronal imaging. However, ATTO 490LS's two-photon properties have not yet been tested nor reported in literature. Here, we perform emission and excitation spectral analyses of streptavidin-conjugated ATTO 490LS to determine the dye's suitability for two-photon imaging with systems that are configured with only a single fixed-wavelength 920 nm fibre laser, but have at least two detectors (Figure 1A).

To determine the optimal two-photon wavelength for exciting ATTO 490LS, we first performed an excitation scan on stained fly brains, which involved measuring emission intensity while adjusting the excitation wavelength. The resulting emission intensity peaked at 780 nm, 940 nm, and 1040 nm excitation, with normalised relative mean fluorescence intensities of 79.1, 11.1, and 10.7 arbitrary units, respectively (Figure 1B, C). Emission was also detected in the 680–740 nm excitation range, however this could be almost entirely attributed to autofluorescence (Figure 1B′, C). The largest of these three emission peaks occurred at 780 nm excitation, thus indicating that is the most efficient laser wavelength within the tested range for maximum emission of the dye. As it is not necessary to excite at the global excitation maxima, and given that we are interested in assessing the dye for compatibility with GFP excitation, the second local maxima at 940 nm was promising as this is within close range of the commercially available fibre laser wavelength of 920 nm.

Additionally, longer excitation wavelengths generate less autofluorescence signals, thus
excitation at 920 nm is a more attractive option than at 780 nm.

To confirm that the wavelengths identified in the excitation scan are sufficient to excite
ATTO 490LS and to verify the emission spectrum under two-photon illumination, we
performed a series of emission scans. We measured the intensities of emission at different
wavelengths while keeping the excitation wavelength fixed at one of the three local
maxima. An emission scan was also done for 920 nm excitation. At all four tested excitation
wavelengths, emission intensities peaked at 640 nm (Figure 1D, E), which is similar to the
manufacturer's reported emission wavelength of 661 nm under single-photon excitation.
The normalised relative mean fluorescence intensities concurred with the excitation-scan
readings, where 780 nm excitation led to the highest emission intensity (200.0 arbitrary
units), while 920 nm excitation resulted in a lower emission intensity (7.5 arbitrary units).
Taken together, results from both excitation and emission scans suggest that ATTO 490LS
can be excited using a 920 nm two-photon laser and will emit at around 640 nm.

To assess the actual utility of ATTO 490LS with the type of microscope widely used for
Drosophila two-photon imaging, we prepared ex vivo *elav-Gal4>UAS-TID-Dlg1* brains
double-labelled with streptavidin-conjugated ATTO 490LS and anti-c-Myc tag primary
antibody coupled with an Alexa Fluor 488 secondary. Discs large 1 (Dlg1) is a crucial
scaffolding protein, encoded by the *dlg1* gene in *Drosophila* (orthologous to the
DLG1/SAP97 gene in humans), and is a synaptic marker (Lahey et al., 1994; Woods et al.,
1996). Here, *elav-Gal4* drives expression of the *UAS-TurboID-Dlg1* responder expressing
the bait protein, which is tagged with the artificial peptide sequence Myc-tag, in post-
mitotic neurons. Antibody staining against c-Myc will label TurboID-Dlg1, and is therefore
expected to label generic neuronal scaffolding such as the post-synaptic density in the
Drosophila brain. Meanwhile, staining with a streptavidin-conjugated dye will label any
biotinylated proteins that are within a ~15 nm proximity to TurboID-Dlg1 (Branon et al.,
2018). The brains were imaged with an early model Thorlabs A-SCOPE two-photon
microscope equipped with a fixed-wavelength 920 nm fibre laser. We observed strong
ATTO 490LS signals through the red-filtered photomultiplier tube (PMT; bandpass filter at
570–640 nm) and were able to identify labelled structures such as the antennal lobes,
ellipsoid body, and the α- and β-lobes of the mushroom bodies (Figure 1F).

To examine the simultaneous detection and distinguishability of red and green signals
excited by a single 920 nm laser, we turned our focus to the signal collected by the green-
filtered PMT (bandpass filter at 500–550 nm). Distinct signals from each fluorophore could
be observed (Figure 1F–F″, see also Extended Data); for example, the ellipsoid body is
exclusively labelled by ATTO 490LS (see magenta arrowhead), the γ-lobes of the
mushroom bodies are exclusively labelled by Alexa Fluor 488 (see green arrowheads),
while the α- and β-lobes of the mushroom bodies and antennal lobes are double-labelled
by both dyes (see white arrowheads). We establish that ATTO 490LS can be combined with
Alexa Fluor 488 for duplexed imaging with a single 920 nm laser. Duplexed imaging with
other fluorophores such as GCaMP should therefore also be possible.

In conclusion, we have characterised the two-photon optical properties of ATTO 490LS and
demonstrated its utility for multicolour imaging with single-laser systems. The dye's
compatibility with standard 920 nm excitation substantially lowers technical barriers to
duplexed two-photon microscopy, particularly for laboratories with legacy equipment. We
aim to eventually engineer ATTO 490LS-conjugated ligands for HaloTag, SNAP-tag, and
other tag proteins (Los et al., 2008; Marques et al., 2022) for in vivo chemogenetic labelling
in transgenic *Drosophila* lines, enabling simultaneous imaging of GCaMP calcium transients
(or other green sensors (Liu et al., 2022; Hao et al., 2024)) alongside a stable red dye for
use as a structural marker or sensor denominator. Such a tool may have relative benefits
compared to (or simply provide another option to) inherently fluorescent proteins with long
Stokes shifts (Kim et al., 2022; Subach et al., 2022). By expanding the toolkit for
multicolour two-photon imaging in *Drosophila* and other systems, this work creates new
opportunities for integrating functional imaging with genetic and behavioural analyses,
advancing our capacity to dissect neural circuit function in behaving animals.

Methods

Drosophila lines and rearing

Methods

***Drosophila* lines and rearing**

A cross of female virgin ⚲ pan-neuronal driver *elav-Gal4 (X)* (Bloomington *Drosophila* Stock

Centre, Stock #458) and male ♂ TurboID direct fusion bait *UAS-TID-Dlg1 Drosophila*

melanogaster flies were set up on standard food supplemented with dry yeast and flipped

every 2–3 days onto fresh food with yeast. Offspring were transferred to food containing 50

μM biotin for 5 days, which led to biotinylation of proteins proximal to the TurboID-Dlg1

bait proteins (following the principles of BioID proximity labelling (Branon et al., 2018)),

and allowed for subsequent binding of the streptavidin-conjugated dye to the biotinylated

proteins (Figure 1A).

Brain dissection and sample preparation

Brain dissection and sample preparation

Biotin-fed *elav-Gal4>UAS-TID-Dlg1* flies were immobilised on ice and culled in ice-cold

70% ethanol for a few seconds. Flies were transferred to a SYLGARD 184-coated (Dow

Corning) Petri dish, and brains were dissected in ice-cold 1× PBS using Dumont #5SF

forceps (Fine Science Tools).

Dissected brains were fixed in 4% PFA in PBS-0.3% Triton X-100 for 20 minutes at room

temperature and subsequently washed in PBS-0.3% Triton X-100 three times for 15

minutes at room temperature.

ATTO 490LS staining

ATTO 490LS staining

1 mg of desiccated streptavidin-conjugated ATTO 490LS (ATTO-TEC GmbH, product no. AD

490LS) was resuspended in 1 ml of MilliQ water to form a stock solution of 1 mg/ml. Stock

solution was aliquoted and stored protected from light at -40°C.

Based on standard *Drosophila* brain immunohistochemistry protocols and a protocol for

ATTO staining of 50 μm-thick fixed mouse brain slices (Reitz et al., 2021), samples were

incubated in ATTO 490LS at a concentration of 1:200 in PBS-0.3% Triton X-100 for 48

hours in the dark at 4°C. The streptavidin-conjugated dye will bind to and label biotinylated

proteins that are proximal to the TurboID-Dlg1 bait protein (Figure 1A). The dye was

removed, and the samples were washed in PBS-0.3% Triton X-100 four times for 15

minutes at room temperature. Samples can be stored in PBS at 4°C for a few weeks before

proceeding with mounting and imaging.

Immunohistochemistry

Immunohistochemistry

For single-label antibody staining, an anti-c-Myc tag mouse monoclonal IgG_1 primary

antibody (Santa Cruz Biotechnology, catalogue no. sc-40) was added to the samples at a

concentration of 1:200 in PBS-0.3% Triton X-100 for 48 hours at 4°C. For double-label

staining, the primary antibody was added alongside ATTO 490LS. Samples were washed in

PBS-0.3% Triton X-100 three times for 15 minutes at room temperature. Alexa Fluor 488

goat anti-mouse IgG secondary antibody (Invitrogen ThermoFisher, catalogue no. A11001)

was added at a concentration of 1:500 and samples were incubated overnight in the dark at

4°C. Samples were washed in PBS-0.3% Triton X-100 four times for 15 minutes at room

temperature. Samples can be stored in PBS at 4°C for a few weeks before proceeding with
mounting and imaging.

Emission and excitation spectral scanning

Samples were mounted on 1.0–1.2 mm-thick 25 × 75 mm glass slides (Biomedia) in PBS
and sealed with 170 μm-thick 18 × 18 mm glass cover slips. Mounting media were
excluded to prevent potential effects they may have on the excitation and emission scan
readings. Excitation and emission scans were performed on a Leica TCS SP8 DIVE
multiphoton microscope (Leica Microsystems, Wetzlar, Germany) equipped with a tuneable
femtosecond pulsed multiphoton laser. Samples were imaged using an HC FLUOTAR L
25×/0.95 W Corr water immersion objective. Emission light was collected using Leica HyD
photodetector.

For excitation scans (Λ, capital lambda), the laser wavelength was sequentially stepped
from 680 nm to 1200 nm in 20 nm defined increments, while keeping the emission
bandwidth between 500 nm and 685 nm. Power output delivered to the microscope
remained constant at 65 mW ± 5 mW using the 'Constant Power' excitation control mode.
For emission scans (λ, lowercase lambda), the excitation wavelengths were fixed at 780
nm, 920 nm, 940 nm, or 1040 nm. The emission detection bandwidth was sequentially
stepped from 500 nm to 780 nm with a step size of 20 nm, with the exception of the scan
at 780 nm excitation where the detection bandwidth was set to 500 nm to 740 nm (with a
stepsize of 17–18 nm) due to limitations in collecting emission wavelengths that are too
close to the excitation wavelength. Laser power setting (1%), detector gain (50), scan
speed (200 Hz), and zoom (1×) were kept constant across all emission scans. Image
acquisition and spectral detection were controlled using Leica LAS X software.

To quantify and compare emission intensities, each pixel of the subsequent 8-bit images
was assigned a fluorescence intensity value from 0 to 255, where 0 represented no signal
and 255 represented clipped or oversaturated signal (Shiffman, 2015), and a mean average
of all pixels in the image were taken. Excitation and emission spectra graphs were
generated using OpenAI by plotting normalised mean fluorescence intensity against
excitation or emission wavelength, respectively.

Two-photon imaging

Samples were mounted on 1.0–1.2 mm-thick 25 × 75 mm glass slides (Biomedia) in
VECTASHIELD Antifade Mounting Medium (Vector Laboratories Inc.) and sealed with 170
μm-thick 18 × 18 mm glass cover slips. *Z*-stack image series were taken on two different
Thorlabs microscopes (Thorlabs, NJ, USA).

The first setup was a factory-built Thorlabs multi-photon microscope (2010 model,
referred to here as "A-SCOPE") integrated with a Nikon Eclipse FN1 upright stand, a 7.9
kHz resonant/galvo scan head, a 1W FemtoFiber Ultra 920 laser (Toptica, Munich,
Germany), a XLUMPLFLN 20× water immersion objective lens (Olympus, Tokyo, Japan),
GaAsP PMT detectors, and ThorImageLS software (Thorlabs, NJ, USA). Laser power was set
to 30 mW, unless stated otherwise. Emission light was collected by the green-filtered PMT,

with a bandpass filter of 525/50 nm, and the red-filtered PMT, with a bandpass filter of 605/70 nm. Detector gains were set to 5% and 1% for the green- and red-filtered PMTs respectively, unless stated otherwise.

The second imaging setup was a Thorlabs B-SCOPE, equipped with CFI75 Apochromat 25×C W water immersion objective lens (Nikon, Tokyo, Japan) and Mai Tai eHP DS (Spectra Physics, CA, USA) running at 920 nm at 22.1 mW power. We used a set of 562LP and 635LP dichroic mirrors (Chroma) and 525/50 nm and 607/70 nm filters (Chroma) for the green and red channels respectively. Detector gains were set to 5% for the green and 1% for the red channel.

Image processing

The two-photon image stacks were subjected to Gaussian blur 3D processing (X: 0, Y:0, Z:2) and maximum intensity projection processing in Fiji (Schindelin et al., 2012). For the purpose of visualising dual-channel images, signal collected by the green-filtered PMT was pseudo-coloured to green, while signal collected by the red-filtered PMT was pseudo-coloured to magenta. 3D rendered movies were created using the 3D Viewer plugin (Schmid et al., 2010) on Fiji.

The schematic diagram was created in BioRender. The figure was assembled in Adobe Photoshop.

Reagents

Animal Species	Genotype	Available From
Drosophila melanogaster	*elav-Gal4 (X)*	Bloomington *Drosophila* Stock Centre (Stock #458)
Drosophila melanogaster	*UAS-TID-Dlg1*	Gift from Gunnar Poplawski and Keshika Ravichandran, manuscript in preparation.

Reagent/Antibody	Description	Available From
ATTO 490LS	Streptavidin-conjugated	ATTO-TEC GmbH (product no. AD 490LS)
anti-c-Myc tag (9E10)	Mouse monoclonal IgG_1	Santa Cruz Biotechnology (catalogue no. sc-40)
Alexa Fluor 488	Goat anti-mouse IgG (H+L)	Invitrogen ThermoFisher (catalogue no. A11001)

245 **Extended Data Figure 1. Duplexed two-photon imaging of *Drosophila* brain stained with**
246 **ATTO 490LS and Alexa Fluor 488.**

247 Resource Type: Image

248
(A–A″) Maximum intensity projection images of an ATTO 490LS- and Alexa Fluor 488-coupled-anti-
c-Myc tag antibody-stained *elav-Gal4>UAS-TID-Dlg1 Drosophila* brain. Both fluorophores were
simultaneously excited by the 920 nm laser at 22.1 mW power under the objective lens. *Z*-stack
series was imaged from the posterior to the anterior side. Detection of **(A)** ATTO 490LS signals with
the red-filtered PMT at 1% gain, **(A′)** detection of Alexa Fluor 488 signals with the green-filtered PMT
at 5% gain, and **(A″)** merged signals. Scale bar = 100 μm.

Extended Data Figure 2. Duplexed two-photon imaging of *Drosophila* brain stained with
ATTO 490LS and Alexa Fluor 488 at different laser powers and detector gains.

Resource Type: Image

(A–A″) Maximum intensity projection images of an ATTO 490LS- and Alexa Fluor 488-coupled-anti-c-Myc tag antibody-stained *elav-Gal4>UAS-TID-Dlg1 Drosophila* brain. Both fluorophores were simultaneously excited by the 920 nm laser at 3% power (30 mW). Detection of **(A)** ATTO 490LS signals with the red-filtered PMT at 1% gain, **(A′)** detection of Alexa Fluor 488 signals with the green-filtered PMT at 30% gain, and **(A″)** merged signals. Scale bar = 100 μm. **(B–B″)** The same experiment as in **A–A″**, but fluorophores were instead simultaneously excited by the 920 nm laser at 8% power (80 mW). Detection of **(B)** ATTO 490LS signals with the red-filtered PMT at 1% gain, **(B′)** detection of Alexa Fluor 488 signals with the green-filtered PMT at 5% gain, and **(B″)** merged signals. Scale bar = 100 μm.

Extended Data Movie 1. *Z*-stack of two-photon image of *Drosophila* brain stained with ATTO 490LS and Alexa Fluor 488.

Resource Type: [Movie](#)
Z-stack of the supplementary two-photon image.

Extended Data Movie 2. 3D rendering of two-photon image of *Drosophila* brain stained with ATTO 490LS and Alexa Fluor 488.

Resource Type: [Movie](#)
3D rendering of the supplementary two-photon image.

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299   reviewing and editing

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