Table 2.1.2.1
The most common space groups for protein crystals

Situation as of April 1997; data extracted from the Protein Data Bank and supplied by Rob Hooft, EMBL Heidelberg.

Space group	Occurrence (%)
$P2_12_12_1$	23
$P2_1$	11
$P3_221$	8
$P2_12_12$	6
$C2$	6

that multiple copies of particles exist in the unit cell. For instance, in space group $P2_1$ (space group No. 4), one can always expect two exactly identical entities in the unit cell, and one half of the unit cell uniquely represents the structure. This unique part of the structure is called the asymmetric unit. Of course, the asymmetric unit does not necessarily contain one protein molecule. Sometimes the unit cell contains fewer molecules than anticipated from the number of asymmetric units. This happens when the molecules occupy a position on a crystallographic axis. This is called a special position. In this situation, the molecule itself obeys the axial symmetry. Otherwise, the molecules in an asymmetric unit are on general positions. There may also be two, three or more equal or nearly equal molecules in the asymmetric unit related by noncrystallographic symmetry.

2.1.3. Point groups and crystal systems

If symmetry can be recognized in the external shape of a body, like a crystal or a virus molecule, corresponding symmetry elements have no translations, because internal translations (if they exist) do not show up in macroscopic properties. Moreover, they pass through one point, and this point is not affected by the symmetry operations (point-group symmetry). For idealized crystal shapes, the symmetry axes are limited to one-, two-, three-, four- and sixfold rotation axes because of the space-filling

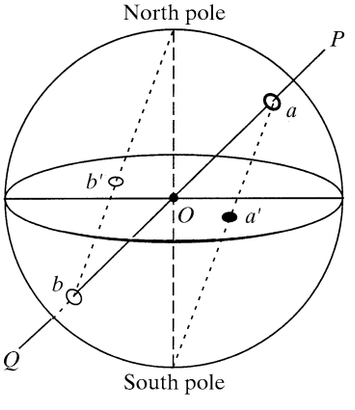

Figure 2.1.3.1
How to construct a stereographic projection. Imagine a sphere around the crystal with O as the centre. O is also the origin of the coordinate system of the crystal. Symmetry elements of the point groups pass through O. Line OP is normal to a crystal plane. It cuts through the sphere at point a. This point a is projected onto the horizontal plane through O in the following way: a vertical dashed line is drawn through O normal to the projection plane and connecting a north and a south pole. Point a is connected to the pole on the other side of the projection plane, the south pole, and is projected onto the horizontal plane at a'. For a normal OQ intersecting the lower part of the sphere, the point of intersection b is connected to the north pole and projected at b'. For the symmetry elements, their points of intersection with the sphere are projected onto the horizontal plane.

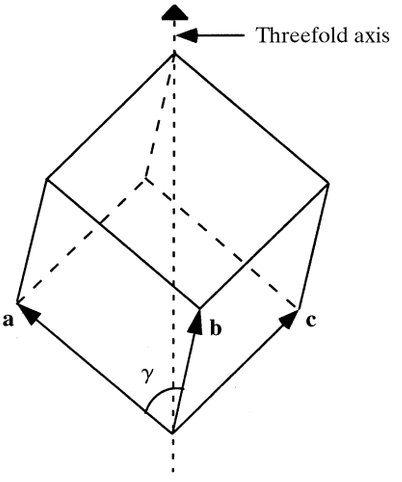

Figure 2.1.3.2
A rhombohedral unit cell.

requirement for crystals. With the addition of mirror planes and inversion centres, there are a total of 32 possible crystallographic point groups.

Not all combinations of axes are allowed. For instance, a combination of two twofold axes at an arbitrary angle with respect to each other would multiply to an infinite number of twofold axes. A twofold axis can only be combined with another twofold axis at 90°. A third twofold axis is then automatically produced perpendicular to the first two (point group 222). In the same way, a threefold axis can only be combined with three twofold axes perpendicular to the threefold axis (point group 32).

For crystals of biological macromolecules, point groups with mirrors or inversion centres are not allowed, because these molecules are chiral. This restricts the number of crystallographic point groups for biological macromolecules to 11; these are the enantiomorphic point groups and are presented in Table 2.1.3.1.

Although the crystals of asymmetric molecules can only belong to one of the 11 enantiomorphic point groups, it is nevertheless important to be aware of the other point groups, especially the 11 centrosymmetric ones (Table 2.1.3.2). This is because if anomalous scattering can be neglected, the X-ray diffraction pattern of a crystal is always centrosymmetric, even if the crystal itself is asymmetric (see Sections 2.1.7 and 2.1.8).

The protein capsids of spherical virus molecules have their subunits packed in a sphere with icosahedral symmetry (532). This is the symmetry of a noncrystallographic point group (Table 2.1.3.3). A fivefold axis is allowed because translation symmetry does not apply to a virus molecule. Application of the 532 symmetry leads to 60 identical subunits in the sphere. This is the simplest type of spherical virus (triangulation number $T = 1$). Larger numbers of subunits can also be incorporated in this icosahedral surface lattice, but then the subunits lie in quasi-equivalent environments and T assumes values of 3, 4 or 7. For instance, for $T = 3$ particles there are 180 identical subunits in quasi-identical environments.

On the basis of their symmetry, the point groups are subdivided into crystal systems as follows. For each of the point groups, a set of axes can be chosen displaying the external symmetry of the crystal as clearly as possible, and, in this way, the seven crystal systems of Table 2.1.3.4 are obtained. If no other symmetry is present apart from translational symmetry, the crystal belongs to the triclinic system. With one twofold axis or screw axis, it is monoclinic. The convention in the monoclinic system is to choose the b axis along the twofold axis. The orthorhombic system