MHC-Antigens: Constituents of the Envelopes of Human and Simian Immunodeficiency Viruses

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Z. Naturforsch. 42c, 1328—1334 (1987); received September 1/October 6, 1987

HIV, SIV. Virus Envelope, MHC Class I and II Antigens, HIV-Cell Interaction

Immunoelectron microscopy was applied to study the antigenic make-up of human and simian immunodeficiency viruses (HIV, SIV) grown in cells expressing either MHC class I (Molt-3) or MHC class I and II (H9) antigens. A variety of antibodies directed against the surface glycoprotein gp120 of HIV and against MHC class I and II antigens were employed. Consistent with earlier observations on the loss of HIV envelope components, gp120 was only weakly demonstrable on the mature virion.

- MHC class I determinants were present regularly in small amounts on HIV and SIV. Class II antigens, e.g. HLA-DR were found in high density on HIV and SIV grown in H9 cells, but were absent, as expected, on virus grown in Molt-3 cells. These cellular surface antigens are constituents of the virion.

The presence of MHC class II antigens in virus preparations used for diagnostic purposes might explain some of the false positive results in HIV serology. Possible biological implications of these virus associated cellular antigens for the pathogenicity of HIV are discussed.

Introduction

The acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) is caused by the infection with a human retrovirus [1—3] recently named human immunodeficiency virus (HIV, [4]); HIV infects CD4+ antigen expressing cells (for review see [5] and [6]). This antigen is expressed on different cell types, i.e. macrophages, Langerhans cells and T-helper/inducer lymphocytes. The latter are directly involved in the regulation of the immune response. The progressive depletion and/or loss of function of these cells leads ultimately to severe defects of the immune system, i.e. to opportunistic infections, malignancies and to primary neurological syndromes. MHC class I antigens are expressed on virtually all cells of the body (except neurons, mature trophoblasts and erythrocytes). The class II antigens are more restricted in their tissue distribution. They are detectable on antigen presenting cells (APC), i.e. on B cells, macrophages, dendritic cells and Langerhans cells as well as on T cells [7, 8]. Virus production is only found in activated T helper cells [9], which at the same time express MHC class II antigens. In resting CD4+ lymphocytes HIV is in latency. We demonstrate, that HIV and SIV incorporate in their envelopes MHC antigens. The role of these glycoproteins involved in the recognition of foreign antigens and in the immune regulation for the development of AIDS will be discussed.

Materials and Methods

Viruses and cells

The two T-cell lines, H9 and Molt-3, and the HIV-1 strain HTLV-III B were kindly supplied by Dr. R. C. Gallo and Dr. M. Popovic, National Cancer Institute, Bethesda, MD, USA. HIV-2 strain SBL 6669 [10] and SIV strain STLV-III mac [11] were kindly supplied by Dr. Eva Maria Fenyö, Stockholm, Sweden, and Dr. M. D. Daniel, New England Regional Primate Research Center, Southborough, MA, USA, respectively. Vesicular stomatitis virus (VSV, strain Indiana) was grown in H9 and Molt-3.

HIV can be propagated to high titers in both cell lines [12]. Freshly infected cultures were prepared for immunoelectron microscopy by mixing 1 part of cells chronically infected with HIV in H9 and Molt-3 or SIV (grown in H9) with 4 parts of uninfected cells. After propagation for three days in RPMI 1640 medium supplemented with 10% fetal calf serum, cells were washed with PBS and 2 x 10^6 cells per well seeded into Microtiter plates (Falcon Plastics, Oxford, CA) (for details see [13] and [14]). The plates were pretreated with 1% Alcian blue 8 GS (Serva Feinbiochemica, Heidelberg) in 1% acetic acid in or-
der to fix the cells by cationic interaction to the bot-
tom of the wells.

Immunoelectron microscopy

Five different murine monoclonal antibodies (MAB) specific for MHC antigens were used: One antibody was directed against the class I antigen beta-2-microglobulin (a gift from Dr. W. Ax, Beh-
ring-Werke AG, Marburg) and four against MHC class II determinants: anti-HLA-DR clone L243 purchased from Becton Dickinson, Heidelberg; anti-
alpha-chain and anti-beta-chain kindly provided by Dr. L. Akerblom and Dr. B. Morein, Biomedical Center, Uppsala, and anti-HLA-DR (clone Tu35), a
generous gift from Dr. A. Ziegler, Tubingen. Two antibodies specific for HIV gp120 were applied: A goat hyperimmune serum obtained through courtesy of Dr. D. Bolognesi, Durham, NC, USA, and affini-
ty purified anti-peptide antibodies kindly provided by Drs. B. Frenzel and W. Rohnsperck, Biochrom KG, Berlin. High titered human patient sera were obtained from the AIDS-Arbeitsgruppe of the
Robert Koch-Institut.

Immunolabeling followed published techniques [13—15]. Briefly, the Microtest plates were washed
with PBS free from floating cells and debris and treated for 15 min with a fixative consisting of 0.05%
glutaraldehyde and 4% paraformaldehyde in PBS. This pre-fixation inactivates HIV, thus avoiding any
biohazard, and circumvents problems due to the re-
distribution of antigens during immunolabeling. The
MAB (10 µl/well, 0.5 to 1 mg/ml) were reacted for 30 min at 37 °C with the cells. After three washes
bound MAB was detected by an anti-mouse-IgG ferrin-
conjugate (30 min, 37 °C; Cappel Laboratories, Cochranville, PA, USA). Sera of HIV infected indi-
viduals as well as the other polyclonal antibodies
were used at a dilution of 1:10 and detected by the
appropriate ferritin-conjugate. After thorough wash-
ing the cells were fixed with 2.5% glutaraldehyde for
15 min, postfixed for 1 h with 1% osmium tetroxide
and treated before dehydration for 1 h with 1% uranyl acetate [16]. The cells together with the plates
were Epon-embedded and processed in situ. Ultra-
thin sections were poststained with lead citrate and
evaluated using a Zeiss EM 10 A operated at 60 kV.

Results and Discussion

In order to control the experimental conditions
HLA phenotyping of uninfected H9 and Molt-3 cells
was performed by flow cytometry (Epics C. Coulter)
using standard procedures.

Consistent with observations by Weiss et al. [17], it
was shown that MHC class I antigens were expressed
on both cell lines, while class II HLA-DR was pres-
ent only on H9 cells.

Infected H9 and Molt-3 cells were investigated with
MAB or polyspecific antisera in the sensitive
pre-embedding mode [13]. Antibodies directed
against HIV-1 gp120 and human patient sera with
high neutralizing titers [14, 18] react preferentially
on early HIV-1 budding stages, appearing in clusters
on metabolically impaired cells [18], whereas mature
virus particles are hardly labeled (Fig. 1) independ-
ent from the cell used for virus propagation.

Different reaction patterns on H9 compared to
Molt-3 cells were observed with MHC specific anti-
odies. The MAB directed against the beta-2-micro-
globulin reacted with epitopes on the cell surface, on
budding and on mature HIV and SIV particles (Fig.
2 and 3) independent of the host cell line. All four
class II specific antibodies, directed against alpha-
and beta-chains, recognized corresponding antigens
on H9 cells and showed a strong signal – higher than
on the cell surface – on budding structures and on the
surface of mature HIV. In contrast, no class II
specific labeling of Molt-3 cells and HIV grown in
these cells was detectable (Fig. 2). These findings
indicate that the labeling of HIV grown in H9 cells is
specific for HLA-DR and that no cross-reaction of
these determinants with the gp120 of HIV is detect-
able. Thus, our results do not support the hypothesis
that MHC class II antigens and gp120 share common
epitopes, which might be involved in immunopatho-
genesis [19, 20].

The same antibodies were applied on HIV-2 and
SIV infected cells. Results comparable to HIV-1 in-
fected cells were obtained for HIV-2 (Fig. 3). At-
ttempts to grow SIV in Molt-3 cells were unsuccessful
and virus was propagated therefore only in H9 cells,
which express both class I and II MHC antigens. Our
finding of MHC class II determinants on the surface
of SIV corroborates recent results by Kannagi et al.
[21].

The incorporation of MHC antigens into en-
volved viruses is not unique for retroviruses [22,
23]. Using cytotoxicity inhibition assays Hecht and
Summers described the presence of such antigens in
purified VSV [24]. In an attempt to study their find-
ings on the ultrastructural level we infected H9 and
Fig. 1. Immunoelectron microscopy of HIV-1 strain HTLV-IIIB infected H9 cells. Monospecific antisera directed against gp120 were investigated in pre-embedding IEM (a, sheep-anti-peptide serum) and in immunocryoultramicrotomy (b, goat-anti-gp120 hyperimmune serum). In both techniques the surface of mature HIV is weakly labeled. In pre-embedding IEM early budding stages are heavily tagged (c, HIV positive human serum), whereas mature virus particles (d) in the same specimen show a low label intensity indicating a loss of antigen from the virion’s surface.

Molt-3 cells with VSV and investigated the antigenic make-up of the virion in parallel to HIV and SIV. A high VSV production was observed in both cell lines. However, in contrast to HIV and SIV, the MHC specific labeling of the cell surface and the VSV envelope was relatively weak (Fig. 3f). This low amount of MHC determinants is probably due to the VSV induced shut-off of the cellular protein synthesis and the high amount of virions produced.

Enveloped viruses obviously tolerate some degree of error in respect to their envelope constituents. The incorporation of cellular antigens, however, seems not to be due to a random event. Bubbers and Lilly [23] have shown for murine oncoviruses that a
Fig. 2. Immunoelectron microscopy of HIV-1 strain HTLV-IIIB grown in H9 (a, c, e) and Molt-3 cells (b, d, f), respectively. Class I specific determinants are detected on HIV grown in both cell lines (a, b; revealed after incubation with anti-beta-2-microglobulin MAB). Incubation with class II specific MAB (c, d = anti-HLA-DR; e, f = anti-beta-chain) demonstrates that corresponding epitopes are present on HIV grown in H9 cells (c, e), but not on Molt-3 cells and the respective virus (d, f).
close physical association of Friend leukemia virus glycoproteins with MHC antigens exists on the surface of Friend leukemia virus and on infected cells. The presence of cellular proteins therefore seems to be a consequence of the association with virus glycoproteins at the site of virus budding. From our results we cannot conclude that MHC class I and II specific proteins are incorporated in a selective way as was observed by Bubbers and Lilly in the Friend leukemia virus system [23].
Specific incorporation of MHC class I and II antigens in HIV grown in H9 cells was reported by Hoxie and coworkers [40] using ELISA tests. In agreement with our results they could show that beta-2-microglobulin and MHC class II determinants were associated with virions. Class I antigens, however, are obviously incorporated in a selective way. Only one of the class I determinants present on the H9 cell was detected in virus preparations indicating that only a specific haplotype associates with viral envelope proteins.

However, an immediate practical implication is obvious. Cell grown HIV preparations, in contrast to genetically engineered probes, contain host cell specific proteins. When virus was propagated in MHC class II positive cells, these normal host components can lead to false positive ELISAs, especially when sera of multitransfused probands are tested [25, 26, 39]. Virus grown in cells devoid of MHC class II antigens (KE 37, Molt-3, CEM) represent a more specific probe and should therefore be used for diagnostic purposes.

The presence of host cell specific proteins on the surface of immunodeficiency viruses might have biological consequences. MHC antigens play a major role in cell-cell interaction and in the regulation of the immune response. It is conceivable that these antigens in combination with the viral envelope glycoprotein can serve as recognition signals. While the complex of viral antigen with class I MHC antigen might activate CD8+ (suppressor) T cells, the other possible configuration, envelope proteins with class II antigens, might stimulate CD4+ (helper/inducer) T cells [27]. This antigen specific regulation with opposite effects could explain some of the disturbances observed in AIDS patients.

It is well established that CD4 serves as the receptor for HIV and that the CD4 gpl20 interaction is the first step in HIV replication [28–30]. On the other hand, the association of the MHC antigens with the virion and the spontaneous loss of the virus specific gpl20 from the surface of the virion [15, 18] implies speculations on the infectivity of HIV. Virions, which have lost most of their gpl20, might be hidden in vivo from the elimination by neutralizing antibodies (“wolf in a sheep’s skin”). Whether such virions are infectious for certain cells and MHC antigens alone or in connection with the transmembrane glycoprotein gp41 might serve as receptors has to be elucidated. Such a function of MHC antigens appears not unreasonable. Recently it was reported that the MHC class I antigen beta-2-microglobulin associates with the human cytomegalovirus and helps the virus to escape neutralizing antibodies [31].

Finally, assuming that in vivo antigen presenting cells (APC) of the monocyte-macrophage lineage are the first to become infected, one can speculate about the role of the MHC antigens closely associated with virus specific envelope proteins. Virus production in these cells persist for considerably longer periods of time and the cytopathic effect is less pronounced than in HIV infected T cell cultures [32–34]. HIV infected APC may react efficiently with specific cells of the immune system and transfer the infection via direct contact to T helper/inducer cells [35].

The Langerhans cells of the human epidermis are of special interest among the APC, since in the natural situation, e.g. in sexual transmission, they might represent anatomically the first cell to become infected. Indeed, Langerhans cells can be productively infected in vitro, and in HIV seropositive persons such cells harbour the virus [36, 37]. Exhibiting 50-fold more MHC HLA-DR antigens than blood-derived monocytes and macrophages [38] Langerhans cells might transmit the virus very efficiently to T helper lymphocytes while exerting part of their natural immune function.

**Acknowledgements**

We are grateful to Drs. W. Ax, A. Ziegler, L. Akerblom, B. Morein, D. Bolognesi, B. Frenzel, and W. Röhnspeck and the AIDS-Arbeitsgruppe for the generous gift of monoclonal antibodies and antisera as well as to Drs. Eva Maria Fenyö, R. C. Gallo, M. Popovic, and M. D. Daniel for providing the cells and virus strains.

We thank Mrs. Bärbel Jungnickl for the excellent photographic work and J.-P. Rabanus for the help in preparing the manuscript.