Ecto-Phosphatase Activities on the Cell Surface of the Amastigote Forms of Trypanosoma cruzi

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Live Trypanosoma cruzi amastigotes hydrolyzed p-nitrophenylphosphate (PNPP), phospho-amino-acids and 32P-casein under physiologically appropriate conditions. PNPP was hydrolysed at a rate of 80 nmol·mg⁻¹·h⁻¹ in the presence of 5 mM MgCl₂, pH 7.2 at 30 °C. In the absence of Mg²⁺ the activity was reduced 40% and we call this basal activity. At saturating concentration of PNPP, half-maximal PNPP hydrolysis was obtained with 0.22 mM MgCl₂. Ca²⁺ had no effect on the basal activity, could not substitute Mg²⁺ as an activator and in contrast inhibited the PNPP hydrolysis stimulated by Mg²⁺ (I₅₀ = 0.43 mM). In the absence of Mg²⁺ (basal activity) the stimulating half concentration (S₀ ₅) for PNPP was 1.57 mM, while at saturating MgCl₂ concentrations the corresponding S₀ ₅ for PNPP for Mg²⁺-stimulated phosphatase activity (difference between total minus basal phosphatase activity) was 0.99 mM. The Mg-dependent PNPP hydrolysis was strongly inhibited by sodium fluoride (NaF), vanadate and Zn²⁺ but not by tartrate and levamizole. The Mg-independent basal phosphatase activity was insensitive to tartrate, levamizole as well NaF and less inhibited by vanadate and Zn²⁺. Intact amastigotes were also able to hydrolyse phosphoserine, phosphothreonine and phosphotyrosine but only the phosphotyrosine hydrolysis was stimulated by MgCl₂ and inhibited by CaCl₂ and phosphotyrosine was a competitive inhibitor of the PNPP hydrolysis stimulated by Mg²⁺. The cells were also able to hydrolyse 32P-casein phosphorylated on serine and threonine residues but only in the presence of MgCl₂. These results indicate that in the amastigote form of T. cruzi there are at least two ectophosphatase activities, one of which is Mg²⁺ dependent and can dephosphorylate phospho-aminoacids and phosphoproteins under physiological conditions.

Introduction

Chagas Disease is responsible for significant morbidity and mortality in Latin America. Its etiological agent, Trypanosoma cruzi has a digenetic life cycle and in the insect vector exists extracellularly as epimastigotes, which upon differentiation become trypomastigote, non-dividing, circulating forms that enter cells and initiates infection in vertebrates (De Souza, 1984). The trypanomastigotes differentiate into amastigotes which divide intracellularly in the mammalian host and it is assumed that the pathogenesis and maintenance of infection with T. cruzi depends mostly upon the amastigote stage (De Souza, 1984).

The plasma membrane of cells may contain enzymes whose active sites face the external medium rather than the cytoplasm. The activities of these enzymes, referred to as ecto-enzymes, can be measured using intact cells (DePierre and Karnovsky, 1973; Fernandes et al., 1997; Meyer-Fernandes et al., 1997). Knowledge about interactions between

Abbreviations: CDTA, trans-1,2-diaminocyclohexane-N,N,N',N'-tetraacetic acid; HEPES, (N-[2-hydroxyethyl]piperazine-N'-[2-ethanesulfonic acid; PNP, p-nitrophenylphosphate; PPO, 2,5-diphenyloxazole; POPOP, 1,4-bis[2-(5-phenyloxazolyl)]-benzene; Tris, tris (hydroxymethyl)aminomethane.

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components of the external surface of the amastigotes and the cellular elements of the host is of obvious importance for the understanding of the complex pathology of Chagas’ disease. The presence of membrane-bound acid phosphatases has been reported in Trypanosoma cruzi (Nakagura et al., 1985), Trypanosoma rhodesiense (McLaughlin, 1986), Trypanosoma congolense (Tosomba et al., 1996), Trypanosoma brucei (Fernandes et al., 1997), and some Leishmania species (Lovelace et al., 1986; Vannier-Santos et al., 1995; Martiny et al., 1996). In Leishmania donovani acid phosphatase activity was suggested as a marker of virulence (Katakura and Kobayashi, 1988; Singla et al., 1992). The characterization of a protein phosphatase in Leishmania chagasi provided evidence that this enzyme is conserved among Leishmania and a member of the four classes of eukaryotic serine/threonine protein phosphatase (Burns et al., 1993).

Reversible phosphorylation of proteins is recognized to be a major mechanism for the control of intracellular events in eukaryotic cells. Phosphorylation-dephosphorylation of serine, threonine, and tyrosine residues triggers conformational changes in proteins that alter their biological properties (Cohen, 1989; Hunter, 1995). The regulation of the complex interactions required for differentiation and proliferation is mediated in part by protein phosphorylation in higher eukaryotes (Hunter, 1995), as well as in Trypanosomes (Parsons et al., 1993). Such phosphorylations are reversible, and several phosphatases active towards phosphotyrosyl [Tyr(P)]-proteins (Swarup et al., 1981) have been described as acid (Lau et al., 1989) and alkaline phosphatases (Swarup et al., 1981; Lau et al., 1989). In various tissues and cells it has been described the presence of phosphotyrosyl protein phosphatase, which are also active toward low molecular weight, non-protein phosphoesters such as alkyl and aryl phosphates, including p-nitrophenylphosphate, O-phospho-L-tyrosine and D-glucose 6-phosphate. (Lau et al., 1989; Zhang, 1995; Montserat et al., 1996). More recently it has been demonstrated the presence of protein tyrosine phosphatase activities in Leishmania donovani (Cool and Blum, 1993), Trypanosomas brucei (Bakalara et al., 1995a; 1995b) and Trypanosoma cruzi (Bakalara et al., 1995a; Furuya et al., 1998), however the modulation promoted by divalent cations has not been investigated.

In this work we show the presence of two ecto-phosphatase activities on the cell surface of Trypanosoma cruzi amastigotes that can be distinguished by their substrate specificity, ability to hydrolyze phosphorylated casein and their response to Mg²⁺, Ca²⁺ and to inhibitors.

**Material and Methods**

**Cell cultures**

*T. cruzi* amastigote were obtained in axenic cultures using the procedure of Rondinelli et al. (1988), with modifications described below. With this method it is possible to obtain the different morphological stages of the parasite, in amounts amenable to biochemical procedures and devoid of contaminating mammalian host cells. The cultures are initiated with epimastigotes (CL strain, CL 14 clone), which are routinely maintained in the laboratory (Oliveira et al., 1993). In the log phase of culture the cells were washed twice and resuspended in M16 medium (0.4% NaCl, 0.04% KCl, 0.8% Na₂HPO₄, 0.2% glucose, 0.125% tryptone, 2.5% bovine serum, 2.0% hemoglobin, pH 6.7), in a concentration of 2 x 10⁷ cells/ml. Cell differentiation is completed by the 5th day of incubation at 29 °C, with a yield of 70–90% trypomastigotes. These were purified through a DOWEX E-52 column and immediately incubated with an equal volume of fresh mammalian plasma for 1 h at 29 °C. After centrifugation at 2000xg for 10 min the pellet was resuspended in LIT medium (Oliveira et al., 1993) and incubated at 29 °C. By the 5th day of culture, amastigotes clusters were collected by centrifugation at 2000 x g for 1 minute and the pellet dispersed in LIT medium.

The amastigotes cultures were propagated by transference to new LIT medium every 48 h. Before enzymatic analyses, the cells were washed three times with a solution (150.8 mM NaCl, 2.7 mM KCl, 0.5 mM MgCl₂, 6 mM glucose, 2.7 mM CaCl₂, 10 mM Hepes-NaOH, pH 7.2). Since amastigotes are not motile, the viability of the cells were checked by trypan blue exclusion (Meyer-Fernandes et al., 1997).

**Preparation of ³²P-labeled casein**

Phosphorylated ³²P-labeled casein was prepared by mixing 5 mg/ml of previously dephosphorylated
casein with casein kinase II obtained from Rhodnius prolixus oocytes (Silva-Neto and Oliveira, 1993). The following reaction medium was used: 50 mM Tris-HCl pH 8.0, 10 mM MgCl₂, 150 mM NaCl, 1 mM NaF, 1.2 mM EDTA, 1.2 mM EGTA, 100 μM [³²P]-[ATP] 10⁵ Bq/nmol). When phosphorylation was completed, aliquots were analyzed for incorporation of phosphate (Silva-Neto and Oliveira, 1993). The reaction mixture was then passed through spin columns, equilibrated in 20 mM Tris-HCl, pH 8.0 in order to remove remaining ³²P-[ATP]. ³²P-labeled casein was then adjusted to 4.6 mg/ml using the following buffer: 20 mM Tris-HCl, 15 mM NaCl, 2 mM benzamidine and 100 μM PMSF, pH 8.0.

**p-Nitrophenylphosphate hydrolysis**

The standard assay for p-nitrophenylphosphate (PNPP) hydrolysis, unless otherwise specified in legends of figures and tables, was measured as follows. Reaction mixtures (0.5 ml) contained 10 mM PNPP, 50 mM Tris-HCl pH 7.2 and 1 mg/ml of protein from intact amastigotes. The reaction was initiated by the addition of cells, incubated during 1 hour at 30 °C and terminated by the addition of 1 ml of 1 n NaOH. The phosphatase activity was calculated by subtracting the nonspecific PNPP hydrolysis measured in the absence of cells. The PNPP hydrolysis was linear with time under the conditions used and was proportional to the protein concentration. The released p-nitrophenol was determined spectrophotometrically at 425 nm using the extinction coefficient of 1.75 × 10⁴ M⁻¹ cm⁻¹. The values shown represent averages ± SE of three experiments with different cell suspensions.

**Phosphoamino acids hydrolysis**

The phosphorylated aminoacids hydrolysis was measured in the same conditions of PNPP hydrolysis except that PNPP was replaced by phosphoamino acids. In these conditions the reaction was also linear with time under the conditions used and were proportional to the protein concentration. The free phosphate released was determined in the end of reaction (Furuya et al., 1998). The values shown represent averages ± SE of three experiments with different cell suspensions.

**Phosphoprotein hydrolysis**

Hydrolysis of ³²P-labeled casein was measured in the same conditions used for PNPP hydrolysis. The reactions were initiated by the addition of cells and terminated by the addition of 0.5 ml 20% trichloacetic acid. The ³²P released was measured as a phosphomolybdate complex using a mixture of benzene and isobutyl alcohol (Vieyra et al., 1985). The organic supernatant (0.5 ml) was added to 9 ml of scintillation liquid (2 g PPO, 1 g POPOP in 11 toluene) and counted in a liquid scintillation counter. The values shown represent averages ± SE of three experiments with different cell suspensions.

**Chemicals**

All chemicals were obtained from Merck S. A. (São Paulo, S. P.) or Sigma Chemical Co. (St. Louis, MO). Distilled water deionized by the MilliQ system of resins (Millipore Corp., Bedford, MA) was used in the preparation of all solutions.

**Statistical analysis**

All experiments were performed in triplicate, with similar results obtained at least in three separate cell suspensions. Apparent Kᵣ for PNPP was calculated using a computerized nonlinear regression analysis of the data to the Michaelis-Menten equation (Meyer-Fernandes et al., 1997). I₅₀ is the concentration of inhibitors that gives half-maximal inhibition. Differences were evaluated for statistical significance by using Student’s t test for paired or unpaired data, as required.

**Results**

Living T. cruzi amastigotes at pH 7.2 were able to hydrolyse p-nitrophenylphosphate (PNPP) at a rate of 30 nmol·mg⁻¹·h⁻¹ in the presence of 1 mM CDTA (basal activity) which was stimulated to more than double, reaching 80 nmol·mg⁻¹·h⁻¹. In the presence of 5 mM MgCl₂. At saturating concentration of PNPP, half maximal stimulation of PNPP hydrolysis was obtained with 0.22 mM MgCl₂ (Fig. 1A). This stimulatory activity was not observed when Mg²⁺ was replaced by Ca²⁺. The calcium modulation of the phosphatase activities is shown in Figure 1B, where the basal phosphatase activity was insensitive to CaCl₂, while the phos-
phatase activity stimulated by physiological concentrations of MgCl₂ was inhibited by CaCl₂, in a dose-dependent manner ($I_{50} = 0.43$ mM) (Fig. 1B). It is important to note that the inhibitory calcium concentration is well above the mammalian cytoplasmic values, where amastigotes reside within the host cell, thus suggesting that the Mg-dependent ecto-phosphatase would be active under those conditions. To check the possibility that the observed activities could be the result of secreted soluble enzymes, we incubated the cells in reaction mixture without PNPP. Subsequently, the cells were removed by centrifugation and the supernatant was assayed for phosphatase activities. This supernatant failed to show PNPP hydrolysis either in the absence or presence of MgCl₂ (data not shown).

As can be seen in Fig. 1A the Mg²⁺ stimulated phosphatase activity (difference between total minus basal phosphatase activity) was higher than the basal phosphatase activity. In Fig. 2 it is shown that the affinity of the two phosphatases for PNPP were also different. In the absence of Mg²⁺ (1 mM CDTA) the apparent $K_m$ for PNPP was 1.57 mM and at saturating MgCl₂ concentrations, the corresponding apparent $K_m$ for PNPP for Mg-stimulated phosphatase activity (difference between total minus basal phosphatase activity) was 0.99 mM.

In addition, these enzymes were able to hydrolyze phosphoaminoacids (Fig. 3). This figure shows that the cation requirement for PNPP and P-tyrosine hydrolysis is the same, namely Mg²⁺-
activated, Ca\(^{2+}\)-inhibited activity and a Ca\(^{2+}\)-insensitive basal phosphatase activity (Fig. 3). The enzyme which dephosphorylated P-treonine and P-serine do not display the same Ca\(^{2+}\) and Mg\(^{2+}\) modulation (Fig. 3). These results suggest that at least two phosphatase activities are present on the amastigotes surface, implying that the same enzyme was active against PNPP and P-tyrosine.

![Graph showing substrate specificity of T. cruzi amastigote ecto-phosphatase activities.](image)

Fig. 3. Substrate specificity of *T. cruzi* amastigote ecto-phosphatase activities. Cells were incubated for 1 h at 30 °C in a reaction medium containing 50 mM Tris-HCl pH 7.2, 1 mg/ml of protein from *T. cruzi*, intact cells in the presence of different substrates in different conditions (1 mM CDTA, 5 mM MgCl\(_2\), 5 mM CaCl\(_2\), and 5 mM MgCl\(_2\) plus 5 mM CaCl\(_2\)).

To test this hypothesis competition studies were done and the results the Fig. 4 are showing that P-tyrosine was a competitive inhibitor of the PNPP hydrolysis Mg\(^{2+}\)-dependent. In the presence of 10 mM of P-tyrosine the S\(_{0.5}\) for PNPP was increased to 3.5 mM. These data suggested that the Mg\(^{2+}\)-dependent phosphatase was also a P-tyrosine phosphatase. To prove this we studied the sensitivity to known P-tyrosine phosphatase inhibitors, such as vanadate, Zn\(^{2+}\) and sodium fluoride (Lau et al., 1989). As shown in Fig. 5 the Mg\(^{2+}\)-dependent phosphatase activity was strongly inhibited by micromolar concentrations of vanadate (I\(_{50} = 3.3\ \mu\text{M};\) Fig. 5A, closed circle) and ZnCl\(_2\) (I\(_{50} = 260.6\ \mu\text{M};\) Fig. 5B, closed circle), while the Mg\(^{2+}\)-insensitive phosphatase activity was less inhibited by vanadate (I\(_{50} = 94.2\ \mu\text{M};\) Fig. 5A, open circle) and ZnCl\(_2\) (I\(_{50} = 821.6\ \mu\text{M};\) Fig. 5B, open circle). Furthermore NaF was also a inhibitor of the Mg\(^{2+}\)-dependent phosphatase (I\(_{50} = 923.3\ \mu\text{M};\) Fig. 5C, closed circle), having no effect on the basal phosphatase activity (Fig. 5C, open circle). No inhibition was observed in both activities when levamizole, an alkaline phosphatase inhibitor (Fernandes et al., 1997), or tartrate, a secreted phosphatase inhibitor (Lovelace and Gottlieb, 1986) were added to the reaction medium (data not shown).

To determine whether these ecto-phosphatases were able to hydrolyse phosphate residues in proteins, we prepared a phosphorylated casein (Methods) to use in our assay. When \(^{32}\text{P}\)-casein, a protein phosphorylated in serine and threonine residues was used as a substrate, its dephosphorylation was observed only in the presence of MgCl\(_2\) (data not shown). These intact cells in the presence of 5 mM MgCl\(_2\) were able to hydrolyze \(^{32}\text{P}\)-casein at a rate of 63.3 pmol \(^{32}\text{P}\)-Pi·mg\(^{-1}\)·h\(^{-1}\). To insure that no proteolytic residues were being measured, we took special care to extract the TCA supernatant with phosphomolybdate complex using a benzene and isobutyl alcohol mixture (Methods).
Fig. 5. Inhibition of *T. cruzi* amastigote ecto-phosphatases activities by phospho-tyrosine phosphatase inhibitors. Cells were incubated for 1 hour at 30°C in a reaction medium containing 50 mM Tris-HCl pH 7.2, 10 mM PNPP, 1 mg/ml of protein from *T. cruzi*, intact cells and increasing concentration of vanadate (A), ZnCl₂ (B) and NaF (C) in the absence (○) or in the presence of MgCl₂ (●).

**Discussion**

In *Leishmania* an acid phosphatase (AcP) localized on the external surface can also hydrolyze phospho-aminoacids, but the hydrolysis is not stimulated by divalent cations such as Mg²⁺ (Lovelace et al., 1986). This membrane-bound phosphatase activity was described as a virulence marker in *Leishmania donovani* (Katakura and Kobayashi 1988; Singla et al., 1992). This process may involve the hydrolysis of phosphatidylinositol, phospholipids and phosphoproteins (Das et al., 1986). Recently, it has been shown that Leishmanial AcP modulates attachment to macrophages (Vannier-Santos et al., 1995) and it has been suggested that signal transduction networks, involving ecto-enzymes with tyrosine kinase and phosphatase activities may modulate crucial events during *Leishmania* infection (Martiny et al., 1996). Recently it has been suggested an important role for protein tyrosine phosphorylation (Favoreto et al., 1998) and dephosphorylation (Zhong et al., 1998) in the invasion of host cells by *Trypanosoma cruzi*.

In this work we demonstrated that in external cell surface of the amastigote form of *T. cruzi* there are two phosphatase activities that can hydrolyse phospho-aminoacids and phosphoproteins, distinguished by their substrate specificity (Fig. 3) and their responses to inhibitors and activator cations (Figs. 1, 5). It is known that most phosphotyrosyl protein phosphatases can hydrolyze both phosphotyrosine residues and PNPP (Lau et al., 1989). The stimulation by Mg²⁺ of phosphatase activity (Figs. 1, 3) and its inhibition by micromolar range concentrations of Ca²⁺ (Fig. 1B) could be indicating that in amastigote form of *T. cruzi* there is a phosphoprotein phosphatase activity able to hydrolyze phosphoamino acids and phosphoproteins under physiological conditions. It has been described a Mg²⁺-dependent, Ca²⁺-inhibitable serine/threonine protein phosphatase in bovine brain, but this activity is not inhibited by vanadate (Wang et al., 1995). The high sensitivity to vanadate (Fig. 5, panel A) and ZnCl₂ (Fig. 5, panel B), two known potent and specific phosphotyrosyl protein phosphatases inhibitors (Swarup et al., 1981; Lau et al., 1989), suggest that this Mg²⁺-dependent phosphatase has similarities with the tyr/ser protein phosphatase present in *vaccinia* virus (Guan et al., 1991) and might dephosphorylate phosphoproteins phosphorylated in tyrosine and serine residues on host cell. The reason for the no complete inhibition of the Mg²⁺-dependent phosphatase activity by vanadate (Fig. 5, panel A), ZnCl₂ (Fig. 5, panel B) and NaF (Fig. 5, panel C) remains unclear. It is possible that the supposed selective action of these inhibitors depends on the catalytic mechanism of the enzymes, substrate specificity and association with possible specific regulatory subunits. Other protein phosphatases such as the receptor protein tyrosine phosphatase (RPTP) were shown to have an important role in the process of homophilic cell-cell adhesion (Fischer et al., 1991; Gebbink et al., 1993). We suggest that these phosphatases present on the surface membrane which externally dispose the active sites, are active within...
the range of physiological pH and able to hydrolyze phosphoproteins may have physiological role in the interactions between parasite and host cells.


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