Molecular mapping of signals in the Qa-2 antigen required for attachment of the phosphatidylinositol membrane anchor

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Communicated by Phillip A. Sharp, September 17, 1987

ABSTRACT Proteins anchored in the membrane by covalent linkage to phosphatidylinositol (PtdIns) can be released by treatment with purified PtdIns-specific phospholipase C (PtdIns-PLC). A recent survey of leukocyte antigens using flow cytometry has shown that staining of certain Qa antigens was diminished after PtdIns-PLC treatment, but staining of structurally related H-2 antigens was not affected. Therefore, in this study, the sensitivity of cell-surface Qa-2, H-2K*, and H-2D* to hydrolysis by PtdIns-PLC was investigated biochemically by immunoprecipitation of radioiodinated molecules from cell lysates or supernatants. Qa-2, but not H-2K*, was released from the surface of PtdIns-PLC-treated C57BL/10 mouse spleen cells and recovered in the cell supernatant. Similar analysis of thymoma cells transfected with cloned C57BL/10 genes showed that cell-surface Qa-2 molecules encoded by a Q7* cDNA and the Q7* or Q7b gene were sensitive to hydrolysis by PtdIns-PLC, whereas the H-2K* and H-2D* gene products were resistant. Using thymoma cells transfected with hybrid genes constructed by exchanging exons between Q7b and H-2D*, the signals for PtdIns modification were localized to a defined region of Qa-2. This region differs from H-2D* most significantly by the presence of a central aspartate residue in the transmembrane segment and in the length of the cytoplasmic portion.

Qa-2 is a cell-surface glycoprotein that is structurally related to the H-2 class I transplantation antigens K, D, and L, in that all contain three homologous external domains (α1, α2, and α3) associated noncovalently with β2-microglobulin (reviewed in ref. 1). The exon/intron organization of several genes in the Qa region (2–4) is also similar to the H-2K, H-2D, and H-2L genes. Despite these similarities, major differences exist between the expression and function of Qa-2 and H-2K, H-2D, or H-2L (reviewed in ref. 5). Qa-2 shows little polymorphism (two alleles, positive and null) and is expressed only on the surface of defined subpopulations of hematopoietic cells, whereas the K, D, and L antigens are highly polymorphic and are expressed on virtually all adult tissues. Although H-2K, H-2D, and H-2L have been shown to serve well-defined functions in the immune response, the function of Qa-2 has not been ascertained.

Attempts to identify the gene(s) encoding Qa-2 and to study the function and expression of Qa-2 molecules were hindered previously by the inability to express Qa-2 on the surface of L cells transfected with Qa region genes (6–9). By transfection of the thymoma line R1.1, however, cell-surface Qa-2 from the Q7* gene of C57BL/10 mice has been expressed in a tissue-specific manner (9). We also exchanged gene segments between Q7b and H-2D* and mapped the tissue-specific element to a region downstream of a conserved Stu I site in exon 4, which encodes domain α3. Hybrid genes containing a 3′ segment from Q7b were expressed only on the surface of thymoma cells, whereas those containing an H-2D* 3′ segment (which encodes the transmembrane and cytoplasmic domains) were also expressed on L cells (9).

In our previous study (9), it was unclear if the tissue-specific expression of cell-surface Qa-2 involved posttranscriptional or posttranslational events. RNA blot-hybridization analysis of thymoma and L cells transfected with the Q7* gene showed multiple RNA species, suggesting alternate mRNA processing in both cell lines. Although both lines showed similar levels and species of mRNA, L-cell transfectants expressed no detectable levels of cell-surface Qa-2 antigen. In contrast, L cells transfected with a Q7b gene segment derived from a cytotoxic T lymphocyte line expressed low but significant levels of cell-surface Qa-2, suggesting that the tissue-specific expression of cell-surface Qa-2 may be explained partly at the mRNA level. However, thymoma cells transfected with this same Q7b cDNA construct expressed relatively high levels of Qa-2 on their surface, suggesting that thymoma cells but not L cells could provide an additional posttranslational requirement.

Until recently, it was believed that all integral plasma membrane proteins were anchored by way of hydrophobic amino acid (transmembrane) segments interacting noncovalently with the hydrophobic tails of membrane lipids. In the past several years, however, a number of proteins have been shown to be anchored solely by covalent linkage to a glycoprophospholipid moiety containing phosphatidylinositol (PtdIns) (reviewed in refs. 10 and 11). Although the chemical nature of this moiety is known for only a few proteins, evidence for linkage to PtdIns has come from studies demonstrating the removal of proteins from the membrane by purified PtdIns-specific phospholipase C (PtdIns-PLC). Thus, this enzyme has proven to be a valuable tool for assaying molecules linked to PtdIns.

Recently, Stiernberg et al. (12) showed by flow cytometry that fluorescent staining of Qa-2 on spleen cells was diminished after treatment with PtdIns-PLC and, therefore, at least some Qa-2 molecules may be linked to PtdIns. Biochemical studies (reviewed in ref. 13) have shown that transplantation antigens, such as H-2K, H-2D, and H-2L, are anchored in the plasma membrane by way of a typical hydrophobic membrane-spanning region of the polypeptide and are resistant to PtdIns-PLC treatment (12). H-2K, H-2D, and H-2L also have cytoplasmic segments of 20–35 amino acids, but deletion mutagenesis of most of this segment in H-2L failed to prevent its expression on the surface of L cells (14). The apparent linkage of Qa-2 to PtdIns is intriguing.

Abbreviations: mAb, monoclonal antibody; PtdIns, phosphatidylinositol; PtdIns-PLC, PtdIns-specific phospholipase C.

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ing because the Q7b gene (4) and Q7b cDNA (9) can encode a putative transmembrane segment and a cytoplasmic peptide three amino acids long. However, studies of Thy-1 and the variant surface glycoprotein of trypanosomes, for which genomic, cDNA, and protein sequences are available, have shown that a carboxy-terminal segment of the protein is removed before addition of the PtdIns anchor (reviewed in refs. 10 and 11). Comparison of the carboxy-terminal regions predicted from genomic and/or cDNA sequences of these and other proteins anchored by PtdIns (10) failed to reveal consensus amino acids signaling PtdIns modification but showed that all have truncated transmembrane segments.

In order to determine the fate of class I antigens after PtdIns-PLC treatment, we immunoprecipitated 125I-labeled surface molecules from lysates of intact cells or from cell supernatants. Using this method, we investigated the PtdIns-PLCL sensitivity of Qa-2, H-2Kb, and H-2Dd antigens expressed on spleen cells or thymoma cells transfected with cloned class I genes. By analyzing transfectants expressing hybrid genes between Q7b and H-2D, this approach has allowed us to localize the signals in Qa-2 required for its modification by PtdIns.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Cell Lines. The Qa-2-1, H-2k murine thymoma line R1.1 (ATCC TIB 42) was transfected with various H-2b class I genes constructs by electroporation, and stable transfectants were selected in G418 sulfate (GIBCO) at 1 mg/ml as described (9). As described previously (9), the expression vector Q7b cDNA Mo was constructed by inserting a full-length Q7b cDNA plus 3' splice and polyadenylation signals from simian virus 40 into pTFCMo, a vector containing the Moloney virus enhancer and promoter. DcMo and Q7b Gene Mo consist of the H-2Db and Q7b genomic sequences in the vector pTFCMo. Q7b/DcMo and Dc/Q7b Mo are hybrid genes constructed by exchanging exons encoding domains α1, α2, and the amino-terminal tail of α3 from one parent with the remainder from the other parent (9). For this study, R1.1 cells were transfected with Q9b Gene Mo, a construct similar to Q7b Gene Mo. R1.1 cells transfected with H-2Kb were a generous gift of Hamish Allen (Biogen Research). C57BL/10 spleen cells were used as freshly prepared suspensions.

Radioiodination. Cell-surface proteins were labeled with 125I (DuPont/New England Nuclear) using lactoperoxidase as described previously (15).

Immunoprecipitation and NaDODSO4/PAGE. H-2Kb and Qa-2 as well as Q7b/Dc hybrid proteins were immunoprecipitated from cell supernatants or Nonidet P-40 cell extracts using the monoclonal antibody (mAb) 20-8-4 (16, 17), a gift of David Sachs (Immunology Branch, National Cancer Institute). H-2Dd and D9/Q7b hybrid proteins were immunoprecipitated using mAb B22.249 (17). Antibody–antigen complexes were collected on protein A-Sepharose (Pharmacia) and were analyzed by NaDODSO4/PAGE on 10% gels as described previously (19). Dried gels were autoradiographed for 5–10 days at −70°C using Kodak XAR film and a Dupont Cronex intensifying screen.

PtdIns-PLC Treatment. PtdIns-PLC was purified from culture supernatants of Bacillus thuringiensis according to a modified procedure (M.G.L., unpublished results) previously for purification of Staphylococcus aureus PtdIns-PLC (20). PtdIns-PLC activity was analyzed in the presence of 0.1% deoxycholate at pH 7 (using [3H]phosphatidylinositol as substrate. One unit of PtdIns-PLC activity is defined as the amount required to hydrolyze 1 μmol of PtdIns per min. PtdIns-PLC treatment was performed by culturing 125I-labeled cells (2 × 10^6) at 37°C in 0.5 ml of RPMI 1640 growth medium containing 10% fetal bovine serum and PtdIns-PLC as indicated. Mock treatment was performed by culturing the cells in growth medium without PtdIns-PLC. After treatment, the cells were centrifuged, and the supernatants were collected. The pellet was washed twice and then was lysed in 0.5 ml of extraction buffer as described (15).

RESULTS

Qa-2 but Not H-2Kb on Spleen Cells Is Sensitive to PtdIns-PLC. Previous analysis (12) by flow cytometry has shown that the staining of Qa-2 antigen was diminished after treatment of spleen cells with PtdIns-PLC, suggesting that some Qa-2 molecules may be anchored by linkage to PtdIns. Based on other PtdIns-anchored proteins that have been characterized, PtdIns-PLC treatment should release Qa-2 into the supernatant. The PtdIns-PLC preparation contains little, if any, protease; the released proteins are therefore unlikely to be degraded and should be approximately the same molecular mass as the membrane-bound form. Proteins not anchored by PtdIns, such as H-2Kb and H-2Dd, should remain intact on the cell surface after treatment.

In order to test these predictions, we investigated whether intact Qa-2 and H-2Kb molecules are released by PtdIns-PLC from the cell surface of 125I-labeled C57BL/10 spleen cells. The association of Qa-2 and Kb with either the supernatant or the pellet fractions from mock-treated or PtdIns-PLC-treated cells was determined by NaDODSO4/PAGE analysis of immunoprecipitates using the mAb 20-8-4. This mAb reacts with both the ~40-kDa Qa-2 and the ~45-kDa Kb glycoproteins and, thus, can be used to analyze the sensitivity of each molecule from the same population of cells.

The ~40-kDa Qa-2 glycoprotein is associated with the cell pellet in the mock-treated group, but it is found in the supernatant of the PtdIns-PLC-treated group (Fig. 1). This result suggests that most of the Qa-2 antigen on spleen cells is anchored in the membrane by way of linkage to PtdIns. In contrast, the ~45-kDa Kb glycoprotein is associated only with the cell pellet in both groups. This result is expected since Kb is known to be anchored by way of a hydrophobic transmembrane segment (21).

Qa-2 Expressed from a Q7b cDNA Is Sensitive to PtdIns-PLC. We reported previously that R1.1 thymoma cells transfected with a Q7b cDNA construct (clone Q7c26R) expressed relatively high levels of cell-surface Qa-2 antigen, as detected by binding of specific mAbs (9). This has been confirmed subsequently by immunoprecipitation and NaDod-
SO₄/PAGE of ¹²⁵I-labeled surface proteins (22). In order to determine if Qa-2 molecules expressed by Q7c26R cells were sensitive to PtdIns-PLC as were those expressed on spleen cells, we radiiodinated cell-surface proteins of this clone and analyzed the effect of various levels of PtdIns-PLC and various incubation periods (data not shown). As little as 0.008 unit of PtdIns-PLC released nearly all of the cell-surface Qa-2 into the supernatant after 60 min. Maximal release was obtained with 0.04 unit, but even at the highest dosage (1.0 unit) a very small amount of Qa-2 still appeared to remain on the surface.

To be certain that the incubation period was sufficient, we determined the kinetics of release by incubating Q7c26R cells at various times in the presence or absence of 0.2 unit of PtdIns-PLC (data not shown). Cells that were mock treated showed no significant release of Qa-2 into the supernatant even after 4 hr of culture, and at 60 min the amount of Qa-2 associated with the cell pellet was the same as that at the zero time point. In contrast, PtdIns-PLC-treated cells placed on ice immediately after addition of the enzyme already showed significant release. Maximal release was obtained after only 5 min and did not increase noticeably even after 4 hr of incubation. Thus, the release of Qa-2 by PtdIns-PLC is very rapid, and incubation of the cells for 60 min in the presence of 0.04 unit of enzyme is more than sufficient to obtain maximal release.

PtdIns-PLC Sensitivity of Molecules Encoded by Hybrid Genes. In order to investigate which region of Qa-2 contains the signals required for its posttranslational modification by PtdIns, we tested a panel of R1.1 clones transfected with genes that express either native class I molecules or hybrid molecules between Q7b and H-2D⁰. Assuming that no unusual splicing events occur in transcripts from these genes and based on the length of the open reading frames predicted from the cDNAs, mature polypeptides encoded by H-2D⁰ and Q7b should have the amino acid sequence shown in Fig. 2. The hybrid polypeptides that result from exchange of sequences using a conserved Stu I site in the exon encoding domain a3 can be deduced from Fig. 2. Overall, the positional identity of the two proteins is about 80%. The relative levels and sizes of the polypeptides expressed on the surface of each transfectant are shown in Fig. 3.

Using mAbs specific for determinants in the a1/a2 domains of K⁰ and Qa-2 (mAb 20-8-4) or D⁰ (mAb 22.249), we

![Fig. 2](image-url)

Comparison of H-2D⁰ (upper sequence) and Q7b (lower sequence) polypeptides. The mature protein sequences are predicted from the cDNAs sequences of H-2D⁰ (ref. 23 and G.L.W., unpublished results) and Q7b (9). The domain structures and the location of the Stu I site used for exon exchange are shown. Arrow indicates glutamine at position 173 in Q7b, which is glutamate in Q7b (4).
immunoprecipitated the supernatants and pellets of $^{125}$I-labeled transfectants that were either mock treated or incubated for 2 hr with 0.2 unit of PtdIns-PLC and analyzed these samples by NaDodSO$_4$/PAGE. Qa-2 molecules encoded by Q7b-cDNA and Q7bGeneMo are released into the supernatant after treatment with PtdIns-PLC as shown in Fig. 4. Significantly, neither the K$^b$ nor D$^b$ molecules appear to be sensitive to this enzyme, and they remain associated mostly with the cell pellet. It is important to note that the D$^b$/Q7b hybrid containing the carboxyl terminal portion of Q7b is sensitive to PtdIns-PLC, but the reciprocal construct containing the carboxyl-terminal portion of D$^b$ is resistant, as is the D$^b$ parent molecule. This experiment therefore shows that the signals for modification by PtdIns must be contained in the region downstream of the hybrid site (see Fig. 2), which represents only a portion of the α3 domain and the transmembrane/cytoplasmic segment.

The Q9b Gene also Encodes PtdIns-PLC-Sensitive Qa-2. Peptide mapping experiments by Sherman et al. (22) have shown that either Q7b and/or Q9b encode Qa-2 on spleen cells. The restriction enzyme map of Q9b is more similar to that of Q7b than other Qa region genes (24). The complete sequence of Q7b is known (4); however, only the sequence of exons 1, 2, 3, 6, and 8 of Q9b have been determined (4, 25). In these coding regions, there is only a single nucleotide difference between Q7b and Q9b in exon 3 that results in a substitution of glutamine in Q7b glutamic acid in Q9b (see Fig. 2). From analysis of the Q7b hybrid gene products above, it is the α3 domain and/or transmembrane/cytoplasmic segment of Qa-2 that appears to contain the signals for PtdIns modification. These regions are encoded by exons 4 and 5, which have not been sequenced in Q9b.

Since a population of Qa-2 antigens on the surface of spleen cells appears to be PtdIns-PLC-resistant (12), it was therefore of interest to characterize the PtdIns-PLC sensitivity and molecular mass of the Q9b gene product. The effect of PtdIns-PLC treatment on cell-surface Qa-2 expressed by R1.1 cells transfected with similar Q7b or Q9b constructs are shown in Fig. 5. Qa-2 encoded by Q9b comigrates with that of Q7b and also is PtdIns-PLC sensitive (Fig. 5). Thus, it appears that both of these genes have the potential to encode PtdIns-anchored Qa-2 molecules on the surface of spleen cells.

**DISCUSSION**

Using immunochemical methods, we have confirmed that the majority of Qa-2 on the surface of spleen cells is anchored by linkage to Ptd-Ins. In addition, we have shown that thymoma cells transfected with cloned Q7b cDNA, the Q7b gene, or the Q9b gene express cell-surface Qa-2 molecules that are sensitive to release by PtdIns-PLC. In contrast, the majority of K$^b$ molecules on spleen cells or thymoma cells transfected with a cloned H-2K$^b$ gene and the majority of D$^b$ molecules expressed on transfected cells are resistant to release by PtdIns-PLC.
In general, the significance of PtdIns modification is obscure, although in some cases PtdIns-anchored proteins are associated with cellular activation events (26–28). In this respect, it is interesting that Qa-2 is "secreted" into the media of concanavalin A-activated spleen cells (29). Biosynthetic studies of its release suggest that Qa-2 is first expressed on the cell surface and then processed to a soluble form of slightly lower molecular mass (30). Since various forms of signal transduction and metabolism of inositol-containing lipids are intimately connected (31), it is tempting to speculate that activation of extracellular anchor-degrading phospholipases may account for the release of Qa-2. Phospholipases C and D with specificity for PtdIns anchors have been identified in liver plasma membranes (32) and in mammalian serum (38). Perhaps diacylglycerol or phosphatidic acid liberated into the membrane by these enzymes may influence intracellular pathways by activating protein kinase C or inositol phospholipid metabolism (33–35). Alternatively, the soluble form of Qa-2 may have a function that remains to be defined.

The alignment of carboxyl-terminal sequences predicted for precursors of various PtdIns-anchored proteins has failed to reveal consensus amino acids that might be signals for this modification (10). Because the Qβ and Dα amino acid sequence differences are known (4, 9, 23), the hybrid proteins have defined a specific region containing these potential signals (see Fig. 2). Within this region, the two proteins differ most significantly by the presence of aspartate at position 295 in Qβ, which is valine in Dα and other class I polypeptides (reviewed in ref. 36), and in the length of their cytoplasmic segments. Most of the other differences appear to represent conservative substitutions or normal diversity seen among proteins, such as H-2K, H-2D, and H-2L (36), and may not be significant in signaling PtdIns modification of Qa-2.

Although the precise location and nature of these signals remain obscure, the Qa/H-2 system—in which markedly different molecular mechanisms are utilized for anchoring similar extracellular domains—appears well suited for investigating PtdIns modification by further exon shuffling or site-directed mutagenesis. In addition, the ability of Qa-2 or the hybrid proteins to be modified by PtdIns correlates well with their ability to be expressed on thymoma cells but not on fibroblasts (9). These observations suggest an explanation for the tissue-specific expression of cell-surface Qa-2 in vivo and may provide a clue for determining its function.

Note. While this paper was under review, Stroynowski et al. (37) published a paper reporting similar results.

Note Added in Proof. Davitz et al. (39) also have identified a PtdIns-specific phospholipase D in human serum.

The authors thank Ms. Monica Stein for technical assistance. This work was supported by Biogen N.V., by grants AI-24562 (R.A.F.), AI-19884 (P.W.K.), AI-20069 (P.W.K.), and GM-35873 (M.G.L.) from the National Institutes of Health, and by a grant from the American Heart Association (M.G.L.).