Binding of Epstein-Barr virus small RNA EBER-1 to the double-stranded RNA-activated protein kinase DAI

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Received November 15, 1990; Accepted December 17, 1990

ABSTRACT
Epstein-Barr virus encodes two small RNAs, EBER-1 and -2, that are abundantly expressed in latently infected cells. Recent evidence suggests a role for EBER-1 in regulation of translation since this RNA is able to prevent the inhibition of protein synthesis by double-stranded RNA in rabbit reticulocyte lysates. We show here that EBER-1 that has been synthesized in vitro forms a complex with the dsRNA-activated inhibitor of protein synthesis DAI, a protein kinase that specifically phosphorylates polypeptide chain initiation factor eIF-2. Gel retardation assays and UV crosslinking experiments indicate that complex formation is specific for EBER-1 and requires the presence of some secondary structure in the molecule. RNA competition studies show that EBER-1-DAI complex formation is not inhibited in the presence of other small RNA species, heparin or the synthetic double-stranded RNA, poly(I).poly(C). SDS gel analysis reveals the existence of two forms of the crosslinked complex, of 64 – 68kDa and 46 – 53kDa, both of which are recognized by anti-DAI antibodies in immunoprecipitation experiments. These data suggest that EBER-1 regulates protein synthesis through its ability to interact with DAI.

INTRODUCTION
Epstein-Barr virus, a ubiquitous human herpesvirus, is a causative agent of infectious mononucleosis and lymphoproliferative diseases in immunocompromised hosts and has also been aetiologically associated with endemic Burkitt’s lymphoma and nasopharyngeal carcinoma (1). In vitro the virus will efficiently immortalise human B lymphocytes, giving rise to autonomously replicating lymphoblastoid cell lines in which the viral genome is maintained as a circular episome in the nuclei of infected cells (2–4). In the majority of infected cells the virus does not replicate but enters a latent state in which expression of the genome is restricted to the genes encoding six nuclear antigens, EBNAs-1, 2, 3a, 3b, LP, and 3c (also termed EBNAs 1–6 respectively), and two membrane proteins (LMP-1 and LMP-2) (5,6). In addition two small untranslated, non-polyadenylated RNAs (EBER-1 and EBER-2) are expressed and accumulate to high levels early in infection (7–10).

EBER-1 and EBER-2 are RNA polymerase III transcripts of 167 and 172 nucleotides respectively which were originally detected in total cytoplasmic and polysomal RNA from EBV-infected cells (11). These RNAs have considerable secondary structure consisting of a number of stable stem-loops (12). Their 3’ U-rich termini have been shown to bind the 46.7kDa La (SS-B) antigen (7), a protein which associates transiently with all RNA polymerase III transcripts in mammalian cells (13).

The physiological role of the EBERs is largely unknown. In situ hybridisation data have suggested that these RNAs are localised in the nuclear compartment, perhaps implying a role in RNA processing or transport (14). However, there is also evidence, at least in the case of EBER-1, for a role in the regulation of translation. The EBERs can functionally substitute for an analogous RNA (VA RNA) that is expressed at high levels in adenovirus infected cells (15–17). VA RNA is known to be involved in preventing the phosphorylation and activation of the interferon-induced 62kDa protein kinase known as the double-stranded RNA-activated inhibitor of protein synthesis (DAI) (18–25). Once activated by double-stranded RNA (dsRNA), DAI phosphorylates the α subunit of protein synthesis initiation factor eIF-2 causing an inhibition of translation at the level of initiation (26,27). We have recently shown that EBER-1 RNA transcribed in vitro from a bacteriophage promoter can prevent the dsRNA-mediated inhibition of protein synthesis initiation in reticulocyte lysates (28). These data raised the question of whether EBER-1 can bind to DAI, preventing activation of the protein kinase in a manner analogous to that of VA RNA. In the present study we have examined this possibility by performing direct binding studies of EBER-1 with fractions from reticulocyte lysate. RNA-protein interactions were analysed by gel retardation assays, UV-crosslinking studies and immunoprecipitation of crosslinked EBER-1-protein complexes. The data show that EBER-1 does bind to DAI in vitro and competition experiments suggest that this binding is specific.

MATERIALS AND METHODS
Synthesis of EBER-1 and other small RNAs
EBER-1 was synthesized in vitro by transcription of the plasmid pPAC-1 with T7 RNA polymerase as described elsewhere (28). The RNA was labelled where indicated by including [α³²P]UTP
(5 mCi/ml; 3000 Ci/mm mol) in the transcription mix. Inosine-substituted EBER-1 was made by replacing GTP with ITP in the transcription mix (28).

The small human cellular cytoplasmic RNAs Y1 and Y5 (29) were transcribed from plasmids pLY1 and pLY5 respectively using T7 RNA polymerase. A 142 nucleotide fragment containing the 5' end of rabbit β-globin mRNA was transcribed from a plasmid using SP6 RNA polymerase under standard conditions (30).

Preparation of protein fractions

Reticulocyte lysate was prepared according to Jackson and Hunt (31). All subsequent steps were carried out at 4°C. Ribosomes were obtained by centrifugation for 4 h at 200,000×g, and the pellet was resuspended twice with buffer C (10 mM Tris-HCl pH 7.6, 250 mM sucrose, 1 mM DTT, 5 mM Mg(OAc)2, 0.25 mM EDTA, 0.2 mM PMSF and 100 μM aprotinin) and suspended in this buffer to 350 μg/ml. The ribosomal suspension was brought to 0.5 M KCl and after 30 min of stirring the ribosomes were removed by sedi mentation for 1 h at 460,000×g. The supernatant was precipitated with ammonium sulphate (0–40%, 40–55% and 55–70% saturation) and the fractions (SW40, SW55 and SW70) were either dialysed against elF-buffer (20 mM Tris-HCl pH 7.6, 10 mM 2-mercaptoethanol, 0.1 mM EDTA, 10% glycerol, 0.2 mM PMSF, 100 μM aprotinin and 500 mM KCl) or applied to a Sephadex G25 superfine column equilibrated with elF-buffer and the flow-through fraction collected.

Preparation of a DAI-enriched fraction was carried out by applying a 0–55% ammonium sulphate cut of ribosomal salt wash to a DEAE-cellulose column (5 mg of protein per ml of column volume) equilibrated with elF-buffer. The flow-through was collected and the column was then extensively washed with elF-buffer. A DAI-depleted fraction was eluted with elF-buffer containing 500 mM KCl.

Ribosomal salt washes from control and interferon-treated HeLa cells were prepared by resuspending ribosomes in the minimum possible volume of 20 mM Tris-HCl pH 7.5, 50 mM KCl, 400 mM NaCl, 1 mM EDTA, 1 mM dithiothreitol, 20% (v/v) glycerol and 1% (v/v) Triton X-100. After 2 h at 4°C the ribosomes were centrifuged at 350,000×g for 50 min and the supernatants were collected.

Electrophoretic mobility shift assay

Binding reactions were carried out in 7.5 μl incubations with 32P-labelled EBER-1 RNA (104 cpm/ng RNA; 8–10×105 cpm per reaction) and the respective protein fractions (30 μg protein) in a buffer containing 10 mM Tris-HCl (pH 7.2), 100 mM KCl, 3 mM Mg(OAc)2 and 1 mM EDTA. After incubation at 30°C for 15 min RNases T1 (1 U/μl) and A (0.1 μg/μl) were added and the incubation was continued for a further 10 min at 30°C. Complexes were analysed on 4% non-denaturing gels and detected by autoradiography as described by Konarska and Sharp (32). Labelled RNA and unlabelled competitors were added simultaneously except where otherwise mentioned. Where indicated treatment with proteinase K (0.1 mg/ml) was carried out following complex formation and RNase digestion, for a further 15 min.

UV-crosslinking

Nuclease treated rabbit reticulocyte lysate or protein fractions (60 μg protein) were incubated for 30 min at 30°C with labelled RNA (ca. 104 cpm/ng RNA; 105 cpm per reaction). All samples contained 5 mg/ml heparin, 80 mM KCl and 20 mM creatine phosphate, unless indicated otherwise, and had a final volume of 30 μl. Irradiation at 254 nm was performed in pre-cooled 10 cm petri-dishes for 20 min with an 8W germicidal lamp (Steril-Air G-9) at a distance of about 4 cm. Samples were then made 0.5% (w/v) in N-laurylsarcosine. Each sample was digested with 20 units RNase T1 and 20 μg RNase A for 1 h at 37°C. Where indicated proteinase K treatment was carried out by further incubation as described above. 25 μl of 3× electrophoresis sample buffer (240 mM Tris-HCl, pH 6.8, 300 mM dithioerythritol, 30% glycerol, 6% SDS) was added and the samples were subsequently electrophoresed on 10% SDS gels with a constant voltage of about 30–40 V for 15–20 h. Proteins covalently crosslinked to RNA were detected by autoradiography.

Immunoprecipitation of crosslinked complexes

After crosslinking of proteins to RNA 0.2 volumes of 5× immunoprecipitation buffer (0.1 M Tris-HCl, pH 7.8, 0.75 M NaCl, 0.25 M NaF, 25 mM EDTA) were added to each sample. All samples were diluted with 1× immunoprecipitation buffer to a final volume of 300 μl. Subsequently 3 μl of anti-DAI guinea-pig serum or control guinea-pig serum supplemented with 1 μg/ml guinea-pig IgG were added and samples were shaken overnight at 4°C. 10 μl of swollen protein A-agarose was added to each sample and shaking continued for 1 h at 4°C. After centrifugation for 2 min in a microfuge the supernatants were removed and the pellets were washed twice with 0.5 ml phosphate buffered saline containing 0.5% Triton X-100 and six times with PBS alone by thoroughly resuspending the pellets with a vortex mixer. 50 μl of 3× electrophoresis sample buffer including 20 units RNase T1 and 2 μg RNase A were added to each pellet followed by incubation of the samples for 1 h at 37°C. After heating the samples for 10 min at 90°C. After heating the samples for 10 min at 90°C and centrifugation in a microfuge the supernatants were subjected to SDS-PAGE. The immunoprecipitated complexes were subsequently detected by autoradiography.

Immunoblotting of DAI

After separation by gel electrophoresis proteins were transferred to nitrocellulose membranes and DAI was detected with a monoclonal anti-DAI antibody (33). Antibody binding was quantified with biotinylated sheep anti-mouse immunoglobulin and a streptavidin-alkaline phosphatase conjugate-based detection kit (Amersham International).

RESULTS

Complex formation in ribosomal salt wash fractions

Labelled EBER-1 was initially used in gel retardation experiments to examine complex formation. This assay uses RNA labelled to a high specific radioactivity by in vitro transcription. Binding of RNA to protein is indicated by a retardation of the labelled RNA on a non-denaturing polyacrylamide gel, caused by its association with protein (34). When unfractionated micrococcal nuclease-treated rabbit reticulocyte lysate was used for complex formation, only a faint band was detectable (data not shown). However, when a concentrated 0–40% ammonium sulphate cut of a reticulocyte lysate ribosomal salt wash (SW40) was assayed for EBER-1 binding a pronounced shift in labelled RNA due to the formation of an EBER-1-protein complex was observed (Fig. 1A). Other protein sources were also examined for complex formation. A
single complex of a similar mobility, but giving a weaker signal, was detected using the 40-55% ammonium sulphate cut of a rabbit reticulocyte lysate ribosomal salt wash (SW55); a strong signal was obtained with a fraction from DEAE-cellulose chromatography that was enriched for DAI (Fig 1B). Complexes were not detectable in the 55-70% ammonium sulphate cut of a rabbit reticulocyte lysate ribosomal salt wash (SW70) or the ‘DAI-depleted’ 500mM KCl eluate from the DEAE-cellulose column described above (Fig. 1B). A single complex was also observed in a supernatant containing native ribosomal subunits remaining after centrifugation of a polysomal preparation from mouse erythroleukaemia cells (not shown), and in a ribosomal salt wash prepared from HeLa cells (Fig. 1C). In the latter case prior treatment of the cells with interferon enhanced the signal in the gel retardation assay. Incubation of the reticulocyte SW40 fraction with protease K after complex formation prevented the appearance of a band, confirming the presence of protein in the observed complex (Fig. 1D).

Specificity of complex formation with EBER-1

We have previously described the presence of DAI-activating dsRNA contaminants in EBER-1 transcripts synthesised in vitro using T7 bacteriophage RNA polymerase (28). These contaminants are thought to arise from non-specific initiation and transcription of both strands of the template (35). We have shown that in a reticulocyte lysate translation assay RNase T1 pre-treated transcripts are inhibitory, due to these RNase T1-insensitive dsRNA contaminants. It was therefore necessary in the present experiments to ensure that complex formation was due to EBER-1-protein interactions and not to contaminating dsRNA-protein interactions.

Labelled EBER-1 was pre-incubated in the presence of either the dsRNA-specific nuclease RNase III or an RNase T1/RNase A mix prior to complex formation. EBER-1 is not susceptible to RNase III digestion but is digested by the single-strand specific RNase T1/RNase A mix (Fig 1A), whereas the dsRNA contaminants are sensitive to RNase III digestion but not to RNase T1/RNase A digestion (28). Fig. 2 shows that complex formation using either the SW40 or DAI-enriched protein fractions is insensitive to RNase III pre-treatment of the labelled EBER-1 but is totally abolished by pre-incubation with the single strand-specific RNases. This sensitivity of complex formation to single strand-specific RNases indicates that complex formation is not due to dsRNA contaminants but is EBER-1 specific.

Competition for complex formation

Competition for complex formation by a variety of unlabelled RNA species and other polyanions was used to examine the specificity of EBER-1 binding and to assess the requirements of the binding protein for EBER-1 sequence or secondary structure. Fig. 3 shows competition data using both the SW40 and DAI-enriched protein fractions. As expected, unlabelled EBER-1 effectively competed out labelled EBER-1 from the complex (Fig. 3A). Calf liver tRNA, heparin and E. coli 5S rRNA were unable to compete with labelled EBER-1 for binding (Fig. 3B and 3D), suggesting that complex formation was not due to non-specific RNA-protein interaction. Other RNAs transcribed in vitro from bacteriophage RNA polymerase promoters were also unable to compete, even at a 300-fold molar excess. This reinforces the conclusion that the binding was not due to contaminating dsRNA as this would be expected to exist in all preparations of bacteriophage RNA polymerase transcripts. A 142 nucleotide uncapped transcript corresponding to the 5' end of rabbit P-globin mRNA, that is essentially single-stranded (30), could not compete for binding (Fig. 3B), further suggesting that binding is sequence and/or structure-specific.

In order to test the requirement for secondary structure EBER-1 transcribed in the presence of ITP rather than GTP (i-EBER-1) was added to a competition assay. This RNA has a disrupted secondary structure due to the presence of inosine residues (36).
and cannot prevent the dsRNA-mediated inhibition of protein synthesis in an in vitro translation assay where, under the same conditions, EBER-1 prevents this inhibition (28). I-EBER-1 could only compete slightly for complex formation when added at a 300-fold molar excess over labelled EBER-1 (Fig. 3A), emphasising the importance of EBER-1 secondary structure for protein binding.

The La protein has been shown to bind EBER-1 (7) and was a possible candidate for the EBER-1 binding protein detected in these experiments. To examine this possibility we carried out a binding competition experiment using labelled EBER-1 and the two small La-binding RNA species, Y₁ and Y₅, transcribed by T₇ RNA polymerase in vitro. These RNAs are cellular cytoplasmic species of 112 and 84 nucleotides respectively. They were identified as binding to Ro proteins and both also carry the characteristic 3' U terminus recognised by the La protein (37,38). Neither of these RNAs had the ability to compete with EBER-1 for complex formation (Fig. 3C). This absence of competition eliminates the La protein as a candidate for the EBER-1 binding protein detected in these assays. The Y RNAs have stem-loop structures similar to that of EBER-1 (29). Nevertheless their lack of competition indicates that the binding of EBER-1 must be very specific and the presence of stable stem-loops alone is not sufficient for complex formation.

The presence of the protein that could bind EBER-1 in various reticulocyte salt wash fractions, and our previous in vitro translation data (28), suggested that the protein might be DAI. This protein kinase is activated by low concentrations \(10^{-9} \text{ to } 10^{-8} \text{ g/ml}\) of dsRNA (39,40). We therefore examined whether a synthetic dsRNA, poly(I),poly(C), would be able to compete out EBER-1 binding. However, a preparation of poly(I),poly(C) that was active in inhibiting reticulocyte lysate protein synthesis did not compete, even when pre-incubated with the protein source prior to the addition of labelled EBER-1 (Fig. 3D).

UV-crosslinking of labelled EBER-1 to protein

Whilst the gel retardation experiments show that complex formation is very specific to EBER-1, they cannot identify the nature of the protein component of the complex. In order to determine whether the EBER-1 binding protein might be DAI, UV-crosslinking experiments using labelled EBER-1 and the protein sources described above were carried out. In the SW40 and DAI-enriched fractions labelled EBER-1 could be crosslinked to two proteins with sizes of approximately 64—68kDa and 46—53kDa, with the former giving the more intense signal (Fig. 4A and B). These proteins were identified as DAI and a protein with a molecular weight of about 31kDa (Fig. 4C), which is consistent with the protein kinase activity detected in these fractions (27). These results suggest that DAI, or a similar protein, is involved in the formation of the EBER-1-protein complex.
significant binding was detected in the SW70 fraction or in whole reticulocyte lysate (Fig.4A). No complexes were observed if the EBER-1 was pre-incubated with RNases T1 and A, or if proteinase K was added to the incubations after binding and crosslinking had occurred (Fig.4C). Competition for complex formation, carried out prior to crosslinking, gave essentially the same results as in the gel retardation experiments. Unlabelled EBER-1 could compete with labelled EBER-1 but heparin, the β globin mRNA 5′ sequence and poly(I).poly(C) could not (data not shown).

Identification of the proteins crosslinked to labelled EBER-1

The size and distribution of the specific EBER-1 binding protein(s) identified in the gel retardation and UV-crosslinking assays is consistent with the possibility that EBER-1 binds to DAI. To determine further whether the binding protein(s) correspond to DAI, labelled EBER-1 was crosslinked to protein as before and immunoprecipitated with a guinea-pig antisera against DAI. Fig.5A shows that the antisera immunoprecipitated a labelled EBER-1-protein complex of approximately 65kDa, together with a minor species of lower molecular weight. A control guinea-pig serum, used at the same concentration as the anti-DAI serum, produced only a faint signal which was probably due to non-specific binding to the protein A-agarose employed in the immunoprecipitations. The mobilities of the immunoprecipitated complexes on the minigel system used in this experiment were identical to the mobilities of the UV-crosslinked complexes described above (Fig.5B). Bands in similar positions on the gels were also identified by immunoblotting with a monoclonal antibody against DAI (Fig.5C). The relative content of DAI in the protein fractions correlates well with the ability of these fractions to form complexes with EBER-1 (Figs.1 and 4). These results therefore strongly suggest that the EBER-1 binding protein(s) is closely related or identical to DAI.

DISCUSSION

The data accumulated from these different experimental approaches demonstrate that EBER-1 binds to DAI in vitro. The EBER-1-protein complex was formed in all the fractions where DAI was expected to be present and not in the fractions where DAI is known to be absent; it was also more prominent in HeLa cell extracts after treatment of the cells with interferon (which induces DAI—ref. 41). In the case of unfractionated reticulocyte lysate only a faint signal was detected. A possible explanation for this is that the EBER-1 binding protein is not sufficiently concentrated to form a detectable complex in whole lysate. The fact that a complex with identical mobility is formed in fractions from rabbit reticulocytes, mouse erythroleukaemia cells and HeLa cells indicates that the protein component of the complex is not species or cell type-specific.

The binding of EBER-1 to DAI appears to be dependent on the secondary structure of the RNA, suggesting that DAI specifically recognizes short double-stranded regions within EBER-1. The minimal structural requirements for functional binding of adenovirus VA RNA to DAI have recently been defined (42,43), but it is not yet known whether a similar structure within EBER-1 is sufficient for interaction with the protein. The absence of competition by poly(I).poly(C) suggests that there may be more than one RNA binding site on DAI, allowing EBER-1 to bind equally well in the presence and absence of this dsRNA. A higher affinity of DAI for EBER-1 or VA RNA than for dsRNA cannot explain the lack of competition since the small RNAs are required in a large molar excess over dsRNA to prevent the activation of DAI in vitro (24,28). It has been reported that poly(I).poly(C) also cannot compete with labelled VA RNA for binding to purified DAI in an in vitro filter binding assay, and evidence for two RNA binding sites has been presented (24). Nevertheless, since another study identified only one RNA binding site on DAI (25) this question needs further investigation.

The detection of two complexes containing bound EBER-1, both of which are recognised by anti-DAI antibodies, suggests that the smaller one may be structurally related to the larger species of 64—68kDa. DAI was originally thought to contain two subunits of 68 and 48kDa (44) although cDNA sequence data indicate that it consists of a single polypeptide with a molecular weight of 62kDa (41). This protein migrates anomalously in some gel systems, giving it an apparent size of 68kDa. The 48kDa protein may arise either from partial proteolytic cleavage during extraction and purification (33) or from the use of a different translational start site on the mRNA (41).

The capacity of the different protein fractions tested for formation of crosslinked complexes, and the specificity of binding as indicated by the competition data, largely agree with the data obtained from the gel retardation experiments. The major difference between the two sets of data is the presence of only one identifiable complex in the gel retardation experiments. This probably corresponds to the larger form of DAI. However, if autoradiographs from the retardation experiments are grossly overexposed, a second complex with a higher mobility can be detected (data not shown) and this may correspond to the 48kDa protein.

These results and our previous observations (28) suggest that EBER-1 can function in a manner analogous to that of VA RNA in vitro, to prevent the activation of DAI by dsRNA. Nevertheless, since the life-cycles of EBV and adenoviruses are...
very different, it is likely that the physiological roles of EBER-1 and V\(_A\) RNA are not identical during virus infection. We have recently discussed possible functions for EBER-1 during EBV-induced immortalisation of B cells (45). Efforts must now be directed towards intact cell studies in order to define the role of EBER-1 in EBV infection in vivo.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank Drs Dan Levin and Ara Hovanessian for gifts of guinea-pig antiserum and monoclonal antibody against DAI, and Dr Walther van Venrooij for plasmids pLY\(_4\) and pLY\(_5\). The HeLa cell salt washes were prepared by Ms Vivienne Tillery. This work is supported by grants from The Leukaemia Research Fund, the Cancer Research Campaign, the Medical Research Council, the Gunnar Nilsson Cancer Research Trust and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft. P.C. was funded by a Medical Research Council studentship; M.S. and J.S. are recipients of graduate fellowships from the State of Baden Württemberg. Exchange of personnel between the U.K. and the Federal Republic of Germany was facilitated by a British-German Academic Research Collaboration Programme.

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