Distinct, developmental stage-specific activation mechanisms of trypanosome VSG genes

S. V. GRAHAM, K. R. MATTHEWS, P. G. SHIELS and J. D. BARRY*

Institute of Genetics and Wellcome Unit of Molecular Parasitology, University of Glasgow, Church St, Glasgow G11 3JS, UK

(Accepted 9 July 1990)

SUMMARY

The metacyclic form of African trypanosomes is the first to express genes for the Variant Surface Glycoprotein (VSG) and it uses an unusually predictable subset of the VSG gene repertoire. We have developed a model system for the analysis of metacyclic VSG (M-VSG) gene expression and have used this to demonstrate that, for two M-VSG genes, different modes of expression operate in the insect and mammalian phases of the life-cycle. In metacyclic-derived clones, these genes are expressed in situ, whereas they are routinely activated by duplication in bloodstream trypanosomes. The expression loci for both M-VSG genes studied are structurally simple and we present a model, based on this, for the maintenance of a separate M-VSG repertoire and expression system.

Key words: antigenic variation, Trypanosoma brucei, metacyclic VSG.

INTRODUCTION

Infective stages of Trypanosoma brucei are covered by a surface coat, consisting of the variant surface glycoprotein (VSG) (Vickerman, 1969; Cross, 1975). Antigenic variation, periodic switching of the VSG coat, allows the trypanosomes to evade the host immune response (reviewed by Barry, 1989). Each trypanosome has the capacity to express, one at a time, probably several hundred different variable antigen types (VATs) and this proceeds in a hierarchical, though not very predictable, order (Capbern et al. 1977; Barry, 1986). Each trypanosome has a repertoire of more than 1000 silent, basic copy (BC) VSG genes (Van der Ploeg et al. 1982), most of which are organized in tandem arrays within chromosomes, although others lie at telomeres.

In the bloodstream, expression of VSG genes occurs only at special telomeric expression sites (ES) (Kooter et al. 1987; Johnson, Kooter & Borst, 1987; Alexandre et al. 1988; Pays et al. 1989). For BC genes which lie within chromosomes, activation therefore entails duplication of an expression linked copy (ELC) into an ES. Telomeric BC genes may be activated by a similar gene conversion mechanism, but can also undergo telomere translocation to a transcriptionally active telomere, or can simply be activated in situ if they already occupy a potential ES (reviewed by Pays & Steinert, 1988). To the 5' flanks of VSG genes is a repeated series of a sequence approximately 70 base pairs (bp) long, which usually forms the 5' limit of the duplicated ELC (Liu et al. 1983; Aline et al. 1985). The number of repeats is often extensive at telomeres, giving rise to large 'barren regions' devoid of restriction sites (Michels et al. 1983).

In the tsetse fly phase of the trypanosome's life-cycle, VSG is not synthesized until the infective metacyclic stage develops in the salivary glands of the fly (reviewed by Barry, 1989), when a very predictable set of VSG genes—the metacyclic VAT (M-VAT) repertoire—is activated (Hajduk et al. 1981; Barry, Crowe & Vickerman, 1983; Esser & Schoenbechler, 1985). This predictability is surprising, as antigenic variation appears to be a system for generating diversity. The M-VAT repertoire comprises only 1–2% of the total repertoire, and from phenotypic analysis is expressed by a mechanism distinct from that used in the bloodstream (Turner, Barry & Vickerman, 1986). M-VSG BC genes occupy what seems to be a specific location in the genome, namely telomeres of the largest chromosomes. Furthermore, they are not flanked by large barren regions (Cornelissen et al. 1985; Lenardo et al. 1984, 1986; Delauw et al. 1987). The question arises whether there is a connexion between this specific location, the different expression system activated in the fly and the unusual predictability in M-VAT expression.

There are too few metacyclic cells available from fly salivary glands to allow direct molecular study. However, since M-VSG genes are still expressed for several days following fly transmission, experiments have been performed on trypanosomes in early bloodstream infection. From such studies it has been suggested that M-VSG genes are activated in the tsetse fly either in situ (Lenardo et al. 1986) or by duplicative transposition (Delauw et al. 1987). There are problems with this approach, however, due to antigenic instability of the developing infection (Le
Ray et al. (1977) and the fact that M-VSG genes are activated polyclonally in the fly (Tetley et al. 1987): examination of individual activation events requires cloned trypanosomes. To resolve this, we have set up a model line of trypanosomes with the unusual combination of relative VAT stability and fly transmissibility, permitting isolation, in mice, of cloned metacyclic trypanosome populations fairly homogeneous in M-VAT expression. We present data from this model showing, for the first time, that M-VSG genes are activated by different routes in metacyclic and bloodstream clones and, from structural analysis of these telomeres, propose an explanation for the puzzling predictability of the M-VAT repertoire.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Trypanosomes**

A virulent, cloned line of Trypanosoma brucei EATRO 795 was transmitted through batches of 25–50 tsetse flies (Glossina morsitans) of a line with enhanced trypanosome transmissibility (Turner & Barry, 1989). Standard methods were used for growth, fly transmission, cloning and VAT-specific immunofluorescence of trypanosomes (Hajduk & Vickerman, 1981; Turner & Barry, 1989). Metacyclic trypanosomes were cloned directly from dissected fly salivary glands. With this line, clones became patent within 5 days, were monitored for VAT composition daily from patency, and yielded more than 10^8 organisms by days 6–8. The clones are identified, for convenience, by the VSG expressed: clones initiated from single metacyclic cells: 1.22i, 1.22j, 1.22v, 1.61g, 1.61h, 1.61i; 1 bloodstream trypanosome reclones of the metacyclic clone 1.22j, 1.22j'; 2 bloodstream trypanosome reclones of the metacyclic clone 1.61i, 1.61i', 1.61i''.

**DNA clones**

cDNA clones used as probes for VSG genes 1.22 and 1.61 were pTcV7.1–14 and pTcV7.15–21 respectively (Cornelissen et al. 1985). The plasmid genomic clone pMG 7.1–1 contains part of the 1.22 gene and upstream flank (Cornelissen et al. 1985).

**Purification of trypanosome DNA, Southern blotting and hybridization**

DNA was prepared from trypanosomes by standard methodology (Bernards et al. 1981). For the metacyclic clones, harvesting of trypanosomes as early as possible meant that little DNA was available. For routine analysis, approximately 2 μg of DNA was digested with restriction endonucleases under the manufacturers’ conditions (BRL), size fractionated by agarose gel electrophoresis and Southern blotted onto Nylon membrane (Hybond-N, Amersham International) (Maniatis, Fritsch & Sambrook, 1982). Radio-isotope labelled probes were prepared by preparative gel electrophoresis to separate the desired restriction fragments using low melting temperature agarose (Sigma) and radio-isotope labelling by hexanucleotide random priming (Feinberg & Vogelstein, 1983). Hybridization and washing of blots, and removal of hybridized probe, were carried out as detailed by the manufacturer (Amersham International).

**RESULTS**

**Trypanosome populations**

From 6 separate tsetse fly transmissions, using the model trypanosome line, a total of 20 flies (9.1%) harbouring mature infections was identified. There was a characteristic pattern of VAT expression as the metacyclic clones expressing the M-VSGs ILTat 1.22 and 1.61 developed in early bloodstream infection (Table 1). As the infection became detectable (days 5–7), in most clones the VAT remained at >99%, but by the time there were sufficient trypanosomes for isolation of DNA, purity ranged from 31 to 95%. Therefore, since VAT switching began to occur around day 7, it was important to confine studies of M-VSG activation to days 5–7 after fly feed, despite compromising the amount of material for study.

**Modes of activation**

Southern blots of DNA from trypanosome clones, digested with Hind III, were probed with either the 5’ Hind III fragment of pTcV7.1–14 or with the entire insert of pTcV7.15–21. The former probe is

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clone</th>
<th>Day 5</th>
<th>Day 6</th>
<th>Day 7</th>
<th>Day 8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.22i</td>
<td>50/50</td>
<td>95/100*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.22j</td>
<td>50/50</td>
<td>80/100</td>
<td>39/125*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.22v</td>
<td>25/25</td>
<td>50/50</td>
<td>26/45*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.61g</td>
<td>5/5</td>
<td>44/88*</td>
<td>78/100*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.61h</td>
<td>11/11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.61i</td>
<td>17/20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Denotes population from which DNA was prepared; blanks denote no trypanosomes available for analysis.

Table 1. VAT composition of metacyclic clones

(VAT compositions were measured by immunofluorescence with monoclonal antibodies in bloodsmears from mice infected with single metacyclic trypanosomes on day 0. Composition is presented as no. positive/total counted. Only very low numbers were available on the earliest days of parasitaemia.)
VSG gene activation

A 23 kb
20-1
m 5-3-

Fig. 1. Southern blot analysis of M-VSG expression in metacyclic-derived trypanosome clones. All DNAs were digested with Hind III. Probes used in these analyses were: Panel A, the 5' fragment of the pTv7.1-14 cDNA clone of the 1.22 gene; Panel B, the 3' fragment of pTv7.1-14; Panel C, the pTv7.15-21 cDNA clone of the 1.61 gene. DNA in each lane was: A1 and B1, 1.22i; A2 and B2, 1.61i; A3 and B3, 1.22j'; C1, 1.61g; C2, 1.22i. Post-hybridizational washes were to 0.1 x SSC, 65 °C. The sizes (kb) of detected bands are indicated.

Specific for the 5' end of the 1.22 gene, the latter for the two 1.61 BC genes (Cornelissen et al. 1985). Fig. 1 shows a representative hybridization for each gene. Only a single fragment of 5.3 kb, corresponding to the BC, was observed with the 5' 1.22 probe in the metacyclic clone expressing 1.22 (Panel A, lane 1). The other two metacyclic clones, 1.22j and 1.22v, had the same pattern (data not shown). As expected, the non-expressors of 1.22 (e.g. the 1.61i clone) also showed only the 1.22 BC gene fragment (Panel A, lane 2). On the other hand, expressor trypanosome clones derived from bloodstream trypanosomes (e.g. 1.22j', Panel A, lane 3) showed 2 bands, one containing the BC gene and the other an extra ELC gene. In case an ELC fragment was present in the Hind III digest of 1.22i DNA, co-migrating with the BC fragment, the blot was stripped of its probe and rehybridized with the 3' Hind III fragment of the pTv7.1-14 insert, which detects from the Hind III site within the gene to the end of the chromosome. Again, the metacyclic clones displayed only the 1 band (Fig. 1B), while the bloodstream form-derived expressor showed 2 bands.

The 1.61 gene gave similar results, showing only the 2 BCs in both expressor (1.61g) and non-expressors (1.22i) metacyclic clones (Fig. 1C) as well as in the 2 other metacyclic clones 1.61h and 1.61i (data not shown). We conclude that trypanosomes activating these M-VSG genes in the fly do not use a duplicative activation mechanism, but rather are activated either in situ or by translocation of an unusually long segment of the BC telomere to another telomere. The latter could not be checked by pulsed field gel electrophoresis, due to there being only small amounts of DNA available.

In the above experiment, bloodstream form-derived trypanosome clones exhibited activation of 1.22 and 1.61 by duplicative transposition rather than in situ activation. To determine if this was a routine mode of bloodstream activation for the two M-VSG genes, a Southern blot of Hind III digested DNA from a set of 8 bloodstream trypanosome clones which had individually activated the 1.22 gene was probed with the 5' fragment of pTv7.1-14. All 8 displayed the single BC gene and an expression linked copy. Four of these hybridizations are shown in Fig. 2A. Analysis of 2 similar clones expressing the 1.61 gene also showed activation by duplicative generation of ELCs (Fig. 2B).

Structure of expression sites

Fig. 3 shows a map of the basic copy telomeres for the 1.22 and 1.61 VSG genes which are used as expression sites in the metacyclic cells. In comparison with bloodstream ES, these ES are very simple: they contain very short 70 bp repeat regions (DNA sequencing reveals 1–2 repeats in each) and very little other sequence repetitive in the genome (Matthews et al. 1990). The brevity of the 70 bp
repeat regions may suggest a low probability of participation in ELC formation, but our results with the bloodstream expressors of 1.22 and 1.61 show that this is not the case: both telomeres can act frequently as donor telomeres in gene conversion events.

**DISCUSSION**

When trypanosomes enter the tsetse fly, transcription of VSG genes ceases (Overath et al. 1983) and is resumed only upon development of the metacyclic form, a transient stage which develops to mammalian forms probably within hours of being transmitted from the fly (Brun et al. 1984). The brief existence and the paucity of metacyclic cells in tsetse flies thwart direct experimental analysis. Fortunately, however, indirect experimental methods are possible, because M-VSG expression continues for several days in the trypanosome population multiplying in the mouse, despite the change to bloodstream forms (Barry, Hajduk & Vickerman, 1979). Although this similarity in VSG expression has sometimes engendered the erroneous belief that the metacyclic stage itself persists for several days in the mammal, we believe that the mechanisms used in the fly are still extant. For example, phenotypic analysis shows that M-VSG expression continues for several days in the trypanosome population multiplying in the mouse, despite the change to bloodstream forms (Barry, Hajduk & Vickerman, 1979). Although this similarity in VSG expression has sometimes engendered the erroneous belief that the metacyclic stage itself persists for several days in the mammal, we believe that the mechanisms used in the fly are still extant. For example, phenotypic analysis shows that M-VSG expression continues for several days in the trypanosome population multiplying in the mouse, despite the change to bloodstream forms (Barry, Hajduk & Vickerman, 1979).

There are disadvantages inherent in the indirect approach described above. Metacyclic populations are polyclones with respect to the expression of individual VSGs (Tetley et al. 1987) and fly-transmitted trypanosomes undergo antigenic variation several orders of magnitude more frequently than do the abnormal rodent-adapted lines generally used in studies on antigenic variation, so stably expressing clones are not readily available (Turner & Barry, 1989). Our model system circumvents these problems: we use a trypanosome line with the unusual combination of fly-transmissibility and rodent virulence which does provide clones sufficiently stable for molecular analysis. Two previous studies of putative M-VSG genes have contrastingly reported, respectively, *in situ* and duplicative activation in fly-derived populations. Neither studied activation of the same genes in bloodstream infection. In the first study (Lenardo et al. 1984), trypanosomes present in mice 5 days after fly transmission were enriched for major M-VATs by antibody treatment and revealed only the basic copy gene for the major M-VSG. However, the polyclonal origin of each VAT means that analysis by that approach could not exclude, for example, the presence of multiple ELCs within the population, each with a different fragment size in Southern blot analysis and therefore at an undetectable level. The second study utilized trypanosome cloned a few days after fly transmission and reported ELC production as the expression mode (Delauw et al. 1987). It is apparent, however, that the clones were raised to high levels by the conventional method, involving syringe-passaging in mice, which yield, as our experiments show, organisms which have switched from the *in situ* to the ELC mechanism.

It seems clear, from our analysis of 6 metacyclic-derived clones, that both M-VSG genes are activated *in situ* in the fly. Although it cannot be ruled out that a more complex process occurs, such a non-duplicative translocation of a very long segment of DNA, study of B-VSG genes has amply documented *in situ* activation as a common means of VSG switching (reviewed by Pays & Steinert, 1988). In the bloodstream, only duplicative activation of both genes was observed in the 10 clones examined. Moreover, for another two M-VSG genes we have studied, activation in bloodstream trypanosomes also occurred only by gene duplication (Cornelissen et al. 1985). Therefore, our data strongly suggest separate,
life-cycle stage-specific expression mechanisms, as we have predicted previously (Barry, Crowe & Vickerman, 1985; Turner et al. 1988). It may be that these mechanisms are mutually exclusive; an interesting possibility is that, in the fly and during the early phase of mammal infection, the trypanosome is incapable of generating ELCs, thereby permitting exclusive use of the metacyclic mechanism. That individual genes can be activated and expressed by such different developmentally regulated mechanisms is novel and perhaps demonstrates the flexibility of gene control in parasites.

These findings, taken in conjunction with the structural simplicity of the 1.22 and 1.61 telomeres (i.e. brevity of the 70 bp repeat region and lack of repetitive sequences) (Matthews et al. 1990) have important implications regarding stability of M-VSG genes and the surprising predictability of M-VAT expression. (1) Lack of homology with other telomeres probably results in increased stability of unique M-VSG gene telomeres (e.g. the 1.22 telomere), including the VSG gene, by decreasing the frequency of reciprocal recombination and non-specific conversion with different chromosomes (Kooter et al. 1988). Indeed, amongst the conserved metacyclic repertoire of this serodeme, 1.22 (known also as GU'Tat 7.1) is the most stable VAT (Barry et al. 1983). At the molecular level, the only difference involving 1.22 noted so far between different trypanosome stocks is an apparent duplication of the whole telomere, rather than any internal rearrangement (Cornelissen et al. 1985). (2) We can now offer a possible explanation for the strange characteristics of the M-VSG repertoire — a mixture of VATs which is very predictable in content. The mixture is probably required for trypanosome survival because, in the field, trypanosomes are transmitted from flies into partially immune reservoir hosts which possess antibodies against many of the VSGs in the trypanosome's repertoire. What is more puzzling is the predictability, which seems inappropriate for an infective stage. We propose that simultaneous expression of the mixture is achieved through a metacyclic-specific mechanism and that the predictability results unavoidably from this mechanism. To permit expression of the mixture, the metacyclic-specific mechanism would have to differ from the bloodstream mechanism, which involves highly preferential activation of one or just a few expression sites (Liu et al. 1983; Longacre & Eisen, 1986; Delauw et al. 1987; Myler et al. 1988). The metacyclic expression system would operate via random activation within the unique pool of telomeres (Tetley et al. 1987) discussed above (telomeres of the largest set of chromosomes) which would act as ES in the fly, and would be simpler than that used in the bloodstream: VSG switching is not required in the fly. Predictability of the M-VSG repertoire would be the inevitable consequence of the combination of in situ expression and recombinational isolation of each of this pool of telomeres: the linked VSG gene would be conserved and be expressed only in situ in the metacyclic stage. Some M-VSG telomeres, such as those described by Lenardo et al. (1984), could be devoid of 70 bp repeat regions and not participate in normal ELC formation while others, such as 1.22 and 1.61, would have a very small number, restricting their interactive role with bloodstream VSG telomeres merely to that of donor (Matthews et al. manuscript in preparation). It is important, however, to note that, especially in such a large and dynamic system as this, not all M-VSG genes need conform to this picture, as this theory requires only that a reasonable number belong to a separate pool. Generation of a VSG switching mechanism would only become necessary a few days after transmission from the fly. If this theory is correct, then there is a basic conflict in the trypanosome, with the pressure for antigenic heterogeneity outweighing the pressure for antigenic unpredictability: some parasite evasion mechanisms may be more precarious than at first suspected.

We thank J. Kooter and P. Borst for the gifts of DNA clones and for sharing unpublished data, E. Smith and C. M. R. Turner for assistance with tsetse fly transmissions, J. Mottram for his critical reading of the manuscript and D. McCombe for assistance with photography. We are grateful to the Tsetse Research Laboratory, Bristol, UK for provision of tsetse fly pupae. J.D.B. is a Wellcome Trust Senior Lecturer and the work was supported by a grant from the MRC.

REFERENCES


BARRY, J. D., HAJDUK, S. L. & VICKERMAN, K. (1979). Detection of multiple variable antigen types in
metacyclic populations of Trypanosoma brucei. Transactions of the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene 73, 205–8.


