Establishment of a Foreign Antigen Secretion System in Mycobacteria

KAZUHIRO MATSUO,1,* RYUJI YAMAGUCHI,1 AKIHIRO YAMAZAKI,1 HIROMICHI TASAKA,2 KUNIHIRO TERASAKA,3† MASAYOSHI TOTSUKA,4 KOUMEI KOBAYASHI,4 HIDEHARU YUKITAKE,4 AND TAKESHI YAMADA4

Central Research Laboratories, Ajinomoto Co. Inc., Suzuki-cho 1-1, Kawasaki-ku, Kawasaki City 210,1 Hiroshima University School of Medicine, Kasumi 1-2-3, Minami-ku, Hiroshima City 734,2 Research Institute for Microbial Diseases, Osaka University, Yamada-oka 3-1, Suita City, Osaka 565,3 and Nagasaki University School of Dentistry, Sakamoto-machi 7-1, Nagasaki City 852,4 Japan

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In order to develop recombinant Mycobacterium bovis BCG into a useful multivaccine vehicle, we established a foreign antigen secretion system in mycobacteria in which an extracellular α antigen of Mycobacterium kansasii was utilized as a carrier. By using this system, a B-cell epitope (Glu-12-Leu-Asp-Arg-Trp-Glu-Lys-Ile-19) of human immunodeficiency virus type 1 p17env, which was identified by a fusion protein-based method, has been successfully obtained from BCG along with the α antigen. This is the first report of expression and secretion of a foreign viral antigen from BCG. It is possible that the system can become a universal vaccination vehicle applicable to protection against various infectious diseases.

The most widely used vaccine against tuberculosis is the live vaccine Mycobacterium bovis BCG. This vaccine has superb adjuvant activity, being able to induce both the humoral and cell-mediated immune systems with a low rate of serious complications. A host-vector system of BCG, which is a fundamental aspect of the development of recombinant live BCG vaccines, has recently received increased attention (2, 7). Recent work on successful transformation in mycobacteria by Snapper et al. (26) enabled us to express a foreign gene in BCG.

In general, it is accepted that an effective subunit vaccine development strategy must take into account factors such as humoral and cellular immune responses, adjuvants, and a carrier. In addition, it is important for a recombinant BCG vaccine to have foreign antigens continuously secreted from the live BCG. These antigens must then be processed and presented dependably on the cell surfaces of macrophages to continuously stimulate a host immune system. Such a repetitive stimulation at the B- and T-cell level would result in a long-lasting immune response. Furthermore, the system involving secretion would have some advantages for the excetration of a large amount of recombinant antigen favorable to better stimulation of the host immune system and for the release of a foreign protein which may be toxic for or degraded in BCG. In this respect, it is of particular interest to develop a novel approach to a foreign antigen secretion system of BCG. Thus, we have cloned and analyzed several genes for proteins secreted by mycobacteria, such as the α antigen (α-B) (15), MPB64 (31), and MPB70 (29) derived from BCG and the α antigen from Mycobacterium kansasii (α-K) (14).

In this paper we describe the establishment of a foreign antigen secretion system in mycobacteria. We also describe successful secretion of a B-cell epitope of human immunodeficiency virus type 1 (HIV-1) (1, 20, 21) p17env from BCG by using an α-K secretion vector.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Reagents. All enzymes used, a DNA ligation kit, and a KpnI linker were purchased from Takara Shuzo Co., Ltd. (Kyoto, Japan). Peroxidase-conjugated goat anti-rabbit immunoglobulin G and peroxidase-conjugated goat anti-mouse antibody were from Dako Co., Ltd. (Copenhagen, Denmark) and Bio-Rad Laboratories (Richmond, Calif., respectively). An anti-HIV-1 p17env mouse monoclonal antibody (MAb) was purchased from Chemicon International, Inc.

Bacterial strains and cultures. The mycobacterial strains used were Mycobacterium smegmatis Rabinowitchi (R) and the BCG Tokyo vaccine strain. Cultures of these strains were grown in Middlebrook 7H9 broth (Difco Laboratories) containing albumin-dextrose complex (Difco) and 0.05% Tween 80 or in Souton medium (27) at 37°C. Escherichia coli HB101 competent cells were purchased from Takara Shuzo. E. coli EQ192 was obtained from H. Kagawa (8). These E. coli strains were grown in YT broth (31).

Construction of α-K secretion vectors. The E. coli–mycobacteria shuttle plasmid pIJ666-pAL5000 library was obtained from T. Kieser (26). Two isolates (pIS18 and pIS27) from this library were digested with KpnI and dephosphorylated with bacterial alkaline phosphatase. Additionally, plasmid pKAH20 (14) was digested with HincII, and the resulting 2.0-kbp fragment was isolated by the DE81 paper method (15). This fragment was ligated with KpnI linkers by using a DNA ligation kit. After phenolization and ethanol precipitation, the DNA fragment was digested with KpnI to convert it to a KpnI fragment. This was then ligated with the KpnI-digested pIS18 and pIS27 (see Fig. 2) and transformed into E. coli HB101. The resulting plasmids were named pIJ1-1 and pJK2-2, respectively.

Construction of an HIV-1 p17env B-cell epitope secretion vector. Epitope mapping of HIV-1 p17env was performed by the fusion protein-based method (8, 30). We prepared chemically synthesized DNA fragments encoding various regions of p17 and introduced them into the BamHI-PSI sites of
pUR292 (24), which was capable of expressing the β-galactosidase fusion proteins in E. coli EQ192. The β-galactosidase–p17 peptide fusion proteins were analyzed by Western immunoblot assay using the anti-p17αMAB (data not shown). The MAb recognized eight amino acids (Glu–12–Leu–Arg–Ngl–Trp–Glu–Lys–Ile–19) in the p17 antigen. This sequence was identical to the epitope mapped with synthetic peptides by Papsidero et al. (19). On the other hand, the α-K gene had a unique Psti site in its 3′-terminal region (14). We used this site for introducing the epitope-encoding DNA fragment (Fig. 6). Two oligonucleotides, whose sequences were 5′-GGCCGAGTCGGACCGTGGAGAGCTCGCAAGCCTGAGGCCGCGCCGCTAGA-3′ (for the upper strand) and 5′-AGGTTGACGCGCCGCGGTCGTGACCTATCTCCCAAGGTCATGCTGCTGCA-3′ (for the lower strand), were synthesized by a 380A automated DNA synthesizer (Applied Biosystems Inc.) and purified as described previously (15). These oligomers were annealed to generate a PstI-HindIII fragment possessing sequences for the p17 epitope and for the COOH-terminal six amino acids of α-K. The fragment was ligated with PsiI-HindIII double-digested pKAH20, giving rise to pKAH21. This plasmid was used as the gene for the fusion protein in which the sequence for nine amino acids (Gly–Glu–Leu–Arg–Ngl–Trp–Glu–Lys–Ile) was inserted between Gln–279 and Ala–280 of α-K. To isolate a DNA fragment containing the fusion protein gene, we inserted a synthetic KpnI linker into the HindIII site of pKAH21. The resulting plasmid was digested with Kpnl, generating a 1.4-kbp KpnI fragment which was subcloned into the KpnI site of pS18. The final construct was named pJKHV-1. The gene manipulations mentioned above were all performed in E. coli HB101.

**Immunological techniques.** Transformation of mycobacteria with the secretion vectors pJK-1, pJK-2, and pJKHV-1 was performed by electroporation by the method described by Snapper et al. (26). The transformants were grown in 200 ml of Souton medium for 30 to 40 days. After the cells were harvested, the culture supernatant was filtered through a Millipore filter (pore size, 0.45 μm) and was 80% saturated with ammonium sulfate at 4°C for 24 h. The precipitated proteins were dissolved in 2 ml of 25 mM Tris hydrochloride buffer (pH 7.5) and dialyzed against the same buffer. A small portion (10 μl) of the protein preparation was electrophoresed on a sodium dodecyl sulfate–15% polyacrylamide Laemmli gel (11) and electrobotted to a nitrocellulose membrane filter. In the case of α-K secretion, immunodetection of the antibody-reactive protein was performed as described previously (15) by using absorbed anti-α-K serum prepared by the method of Tasaka and Matsuo (28). Rabbits were intramuscularly inoculated with α-K antigen combined with Freund’s incomplete adjuvant (Iatron, Tokyo, Japan). Partially purified IgG antibody (40 mg/ml) was mixed with the same volume of 20-μg/ml partially purified α antigen of Mycobacterium tuberculosis (α-T), incubated at 37°C for 1 h and at 4°C overnight, and centrifuged at 2,000 × g for 30 min. The supernatant was referred to as the absorbed anti-α-K serum. Additionally, in the immunodetection of the epitope–α-K fusion protein, we used the anti-p17αMAB as a primary antibody and the peroxidase-conjugated goat antimouse antibody as a secondary antibody.

**Purification of α-K secreted from recombinant clones.** The protein solution prepared from the culture filtrate of BCG184 (harboring pJK-1) or M. smegmatis 274 (harboring pJK-2) was desalted with a PD-10 column (Pharmacia) equilibrated with distilled water and loaded onto an FPLC Superose 12 column (10 mm [diameter] by 300 mm; Pharmacia) which had previously been equilibrated with 50 mM Tris hydrochloride (pH 7.5)–0.15 M NaCl buffer. The fraction corresponding to that of α-K, which was eluted 40 min after injection with a flow rate of 0.4 ml/min, was collected and desalted with a PD-10 column. The protein fraction was concentrated and separated by reverse-phase high-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC) (TSKgel Phenyl–SPW RP column; 4.6 mm [diameter] by 75 mm; Tosoh Co., Ltd., Tokyo, Japan) with a linear gradient of acetonitrile (20 to 50% for 25 min) in 0.05% trifluoroacetic acid. A portion (400 μl) of each fraction was supplemented with 5 μg of carrier bovine serum albumin, and the protein mixture was precipitated in 5% trichloroacetic acid. Western blot analysis for the protein was carried out as described above. The fraction including antibody-reactive protein was analyzed by a 470A gas phase protein sequencer (Applied Biosystems).

**RESULTS**

Isolation of a single plasmid replicable in mycobacteria from the plp666–pAL5000 library. To facilitate the construction of α-K secretion vectors, it was initially necessary to purify a single plasmid from the mixed shuttle plasmid plp666–pAL5000 library (26), in which BamHI-digested plp666 (9) was randomly inserted at a variety of MboI sites in pAL5000 (10). The entire DNA sequence of the plasmid pAL5000, the first reported mycobacterial plasmid, has been determined (22). It has five open reading frames, and it has been shown that a foreign gene can be inserted into a unique KpnI site located within the ORF3 open reading frame without preventing its replication (22). It was therefore presumed that the shuttle plasmid, into which pAL5000 linearized within ORF3 by MboI partial digestion, was cloned between two BamHI sites of plp666 and possibly would replicate in mycobacteria. An attempt was made to isolate this plasmid. There were two HindIII sites 342 bp internal to both ends of the BamHI-digested plp666 large fragment (9). Accordingly, the location of MboI sites used for cloning could be determined by estimating the size of the DNA fragment derived from a KpnI–HindIII double-digested shuttle plasmid. E. coli HB101 was then transformed with the library, and 36 clones of chloramphenicol-resistant transformants were isolated. These plasmids were double digested with HindIII and KpnI and electrophoresed on a 4% polyacrylamide gel (Fig. 1). In this way, pS18 and pS27 were obtained as potential candidates and were then used to construct the α-K secretion vectors.

**Secrecion of α-K from BCG and M. smegmatis.** The strategy for construction of α-K secretion vectors is shown in Fig. 2. The constructed vectors (pJK-1 from pS18 and pJK-2 from pS27) consist of a promoter, a signal peptide region, and a structural gene for α-K. They were introduced into BCG Tokyo and M. smegmatis R by electroporation. These experiments yielded at least 100 to 500 kanamycin-resistant transformants per μg for BCG and 10 kanamycin-resistant transformants per μg for M. smegmatis.

We analyzed the filtrate from the cultures of the transformants by sodium dodecyl sulfate–polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis and a Western blot assay. The results are presented in Fig. 3. In BCG184 harboring pJK-1, as well as BCG274 and M. smegmatis 274 harboring pJK-2, the absorbed anti-α-K serum detected a single reactive protein which migrated with a molecular weight similar to that of the purified native α-K (Fig. 3, lanes 9, 10, and 12).

**Purification of antibody-reactive proteins.** For further confirmation, we purified the antibody-reactive proteins from...
the culture media of BCG184 and M. smegmatis 274 by a two-step process involving HPLC and determining the NH2-terminal amino acid sequences. Figure 4 shows the chromatograms obtained by using a TSKgel Phenyl-SPW RP column in the second step. In both instances, the antibody-reactive proteins of BCG184 and M. smegmatis 274 were eluted as a primary peak in this situation (Fig. 4a, lane 2, and Fig. 4b, lane 3). The purified protein was then analyzed with a protein sequencer. The NH2-terminal sequences of the proteins purified from BCG184 and M. smegmatis 274 are presented in Fig. 5. They were completely identical with that of α-K (14) but not with the sequence from α-B (15), and no unprocessed protein with the signal peptide was found, suggesting that the mature α-K protein was secreted from these mycobacterial species.

**Secretion of a B-cell epitope of HIV-1 p17agg from BCG.** To prove the applicability of the α-K secretion vectors, we attempted to induce BCG to secrete an α-K chimera protein fused with one of the B-cell epitopes of HIV-1 p17agg from BCG. In the development of a vaccine against acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) caused by HIV-1, there is a growing interest in the gag and pol antigens, which are believed to be more rigidly conserved than the antigen of the env gene. For a model for a subunit AIDS vaccine, we focused on p17agg B-cell epitopes which could easily be mapped with MAbS by a fusion protein-based or synthetic peptide-based method. Because one MAB was found to recognize eight amino acids (Glu-12 through Ile-19) in p17, synthetic oligonucleotides coding for this peptide were inserted into the 3'-terminal region of the α-K gene (Fig. 6). The culture medium from BCG transformed with the vector pJKHIV-1, named BCG18HIV, was analyzed by Western blot assay using the MAB against p17 (Fig. 7). Although no protein was detected in the control culture medium (BCG184; Fig. 7, lane 7), a reactive protein with a slightly larger molecular weight than that of α-K (lane 1) was detected in the BCG18HIV culture medium (lane 8). This indicated that the B-cell epitope along with the α-K carrier was secreted from the BCG cells.

**DISCUSSION**

In this paper, we report the establishment of a foreign antigen secretion system in mycobacteria. By using the secretion apparatus for α-K, the B-cell epitope of HIV-1 gag antigen was effectively excreted from BCG, suggesting that the α-K secretion vector could be widely used to excrete other foreign antigens. The reason why we used the cross-reactive antigen α-K was that it is the most suitable carrier for the secretion of foreign antigens because of its structural similarity to α-B. More importantly, α-K, which possesses the species-specific antigenic determinant (28), exhibits sero-
logical difference from α-B. Therefore, it was presumed that it could be easily detected upon excretion by using the anti-α-K serum absorbed by α-B or α-T. The results met our expectations, as shown above. In addition to the results of the NH₂-terminal sequence analyses of proteins purified from culture filtrates of BCG184 and M. smegmatis 274, some characteristic cytoplasmic proteins were not visible in two-dimensional gel electrophoresis of the culture filtrate of

![FIG. 4. Purification of α-K from the culture filtrate of recombinant clones. (a) Chromatogram of the second-step reverse-phase HPLC for the proteins derived from BCG184 culture. (b) Chromatogram of the second-step reverse-phase HPLC for the proteins derived from M. smegmatis 274 culture. The inset at the upper left of each chromatogram shows the Western blot analysis for each fraction.](image)

BCG18HIV, and the α-K fused with the p17*Kag* B-cell epitope could not be detected in the cytoplasmic fraction (data not shown). These results suggest that α-K and its fusion protein can be accurately processed and effectively secreted from two mycobacterial species using their own promoter and signal peptide functions. Although a recent report on the expression of the 65-kDa Mycobacterium leprae antigen in M. smegmatis exists (6), our data provide the first example of the expression and secretion of foreign antigens from BCG.

The above-mentioned foreign antigen secretion system of BCG is particularly important, not only for the development of vaccines but also for gaining some insights into the molecular processes involved in the host immune responses occurring in and on antigen-presenting cells. Recent studies have shown that recombinant *Salmonella* strains elicit humoral and cellular immune responses to an expressed antigen (17). In the case of a live viral vector, initial experiments have been done with a vaccinia virus (13, 18). This virus is widely used because it is capable of generating cellular immune responses, especially those involving the cytotoxic T lymphocyte. In addition, other viruses proposed to be used as vectors include adenovirus (4), herpesvirus (25), and poliovirus (5). It should be noted that BCG strains have several distinct advantages over these vectors for practical use. BCG has been administered to billions of

![FIG. 5. NH₂-terminal amino acid sequences of α antigens purified from the culture filtrate of recombinant clones.](image)
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LITERATURE CITED


