A Time-dependent and Voltage-sensitive K+ Current in Single Cells from Frog Atrium

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ABSTRACT A quantitative description of the time-dependent and voltage-sensitive outward currents in heart has been hampered by the complications inherent to the multicellular preparations previously used. We have used the whole-cell patch-clamp technique to record the delayed outward K+ current, \( I_K \), in single cells dissociated from frog atrium. Na+ currents were blocked with tetrodotoxin and Ca2+ currents with Mn2+ or Cd2+. After depolarizations from \(-50 \text{ mV} \) to potentials positive to \(-30 \text{ mV} \), a time-dependent outward current was observed. This current has been characterized according to its steady state activation, kinetics, and ion transfer function. The current is well described as a single Hodgkin-Huxley conductance. The deactivation of the current is a single exponential. Activation of the current is sigmoid and is fitted well by raising the activation variable to the second power. The reversal potential of \( I_K \) is near \( E_K \) and shifts by 57 mV/10-fold change in \([K^+]_o\). This suggests that the current is carried selectively by K ions. The threshold for activation is near \(-30 \text{ mV} \). \( I_K \) is maximally activated positive to +20 mV and shows no inactivation. The fully activated current-voltage relationship is linear between \(-110 \) and \(+50 \text{ mV} \). Neither \( \text{Ba}^{2+} \) (250 \( \mu \text{M} \)) nor \( \text{Cd}^{2+} \) (100 \( \mu \text{M} \)) affects \( I_K \).

INTRODUCTION

In the squid axon, depolarization elicits a fast inward Na+ current that is followed by a slowly developing outward current carried by K ions (Hodgkin and Huxley, 1952). This current, the “delayed rectifier,” is responsible for initiating repolarization of the membrane. A similar current has been described in both amphibian (Rougier et al., 1968; DeHemptinne, 1971; Maughan, 1973; Ojeda and Rougier, 1974; Brown et al., 1976a–c, 1980; Giles and Noble, 1976; Hume and Giles, 1983) and mammalian heart (McAllister and Noble, 1966; D. Noble and Tsien, 1969a, b; Katzung and Morgenstern, 1977; McDonald and Trautwein, 1978; DiFrancesco et al., 1979; Kokubun et al., 1982).

There is considerable disagreement, however, about the nature of the time-dependent outward current in heart. The number of currents present, the activation ranges and kinetics of the currents, their selectivity for K+, and their functions in initiating or controlling repolarization have remained unclear (see

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reviews by Carmeliet and Vereecke, 1979, and D. Noble, 1984). Many previous studies have used multicellular preparations, which are difficult to space-clamp adequately. The large series resistance that is usually encountered can also introduce significant errors in the measurement of membrane potential (Johnson and Lieberman, 1971; New and Trautwein, 1972; Attwell and Cohen, 1977). Furthermore, K⁺ currents can result in the accumulation of K⁺ in narrow extracellular spaces and a change in the equilibrium potential for K⁺ (Maughan, 1973; Brown et al., 1976b, 1980; S. J. Noble, 1976; Attwell and Cohen, 1977; Kline and Morad, 1978; Attwell et al., 1979; Morad, 1980; Lammel, 1981; Cohen and Kline, 1982).

The whole-cell patch-clamp technique (Neher and Sakmann, 1976; Hamill et al., 1981) of single, isolated cells (Isenberg and Klockner, 1982; Hume and Giles, 1983; for references see Trube, 1983; Bkaily et al., 1984) circumvents many of the shortcomings of multicellular preparations.

Hume and Giles (1983) have examined $I_K$ in single dissociated cells from frog atrium using a variation of the whole-cell patch-clamp technique. They provided evidence that $I_K$ was carried mainly by K ions, that accumulation and depletion were not a major problem in this preparation, and that $I_K$ could be explained by a single Hodgkin-Huxley-type conductance. In this article, using different conditions, we have confirmed the findings of Hume and Giles (1983) and, in addition, have characterized $I_K$ in detail with respect to its ion transfer function, activation, kinetics, and sensitivity to Ba²⁺ and Cd²⁺. Recently, Giles and Shibata (1985) have completed an analysis of $I_K$ in primary pacemaker cells of the frog sinus venosus. The characteristics of $I_K$ are very similar in primary pacemaker tissue and in the atrium. A preliminary note has appeared (Simmons and Hartzell, 1985).

**METHODS**

**Drugs and Solutions**

The compositions of Ringer solutions were (in mM): normal Ringer: 115 NaCl, 4 KCl, 2 CaCl₂, 1 MgCl₂, 10 HEPES, pH 7.4; Mn Ringer: 112 NaCl, 4 KCl, 0.1 CaCl₂, 4 MnCl₂, 10 HEPES, pH 7.4; Cd Ringer: 117 NaCl, 4 KCl, 0.1 CaCl₂, 10 HEPES, 0.1 CdCl₂, pH 7.4. The composition of the intracellular medium was (mM): 120 KCl, 0.5 MgCl₂, 0.3 NaH₂PO₄, 1 EGTA, 2 Na₂ATP, 0.2 Na₂GTP, 5 HEPES, pH 7.6 (adjusted with KOH). Extracellular [K⁺] was changed by equimolar substitution of KCl for NaCl. Tetrodotoxin (TTX) (1 μM) was routinely added to the extracellular medium to block the fast Na⁺ current. All experiments were performed at 20°C. TTX, type I collagenase, type II trypsin from bovine pancreas, and bovine serum albumin were obtained from Sigma Chemical Co., St. Louis, MO.

**Dissociation of Cells**

Frogs, *Rana pipiens*, were used. The heart was removed and the atrium was dissected in normal Ringer solution. The dissociation was performed by a modification of the method of Hume and Giles (1983) in normal Ringer with CaCl₂ reduced to 8 μM in petri dishes agitated on an orbital shaker. The atrium was incubated for 75 min in 200 U/ml collagenase plus 2,000 U/ml trypsin, rinsed for 5 min in 0.1% bovine serum albumin, and then incubated for 1.5 h in 100 U/ml collagenase. The tissue was transferred to Mn...
Ringer or Cd Ringer and gently triturated with a 5-ml pipette to dissociate single cells. After allowing the cells to attach to the dish (~15 min), the dishes were placed in the patch-clamp setup and constantly superfused with Ringer solution at a rate of ~0.75 ml/min.

**Electrophysiology**

The whole-cell recording configuration of the patch-clamp technique (Hamill et al., 1981) was used for voltage-clamping single dissociated cells (Hume and Giles, 1983; Fischmeister and Hartzell, 1986). Patch-clamp electrodes, pulled on a vertical puller, coated with Sylgard, and fire-polished (Corey and Stevens, 1983), had resistances of 1–5 MΩ. The electrode was filled with intracellular medium. A List EPC-7 (List Medical-Electronic, Darmstadt, Federal Republic of Germany) amplifier was used for recording cell currents. The establishment of whole-cell recording was confirmed by monitoring the increase in capacitance as the patch was broken and by monitoring resting membrane potential in the current-clamp mode after patch disruption. Total series resistance (including pipette resistance) ranged from 2 to 10 MΩ; typically, >50% of the series resistance could be compensated (Sigworth, 1983). In most experiments, the uncompensated series resistance was <2 MΩ. If the uncompensated series resistance was >10 MΩ, the cell was not used. Since the maximum current activated in a cell was ~1.5 nA, voltage errors caused by series resistance will be small at the maximum currents recorded and negligible near the reversal potential. Previous experiments have demonstrated that adequate voltage homogeneity of these cells is achieved (Fischmeister and Hartzell, 1986).

**Voltage-Clamp Protocols and Terminology**

Voltage steps were made by means of a programmable digital stimulator designed and constructed by Mr. William N. Goolsby (Dept. of Anatomy and Cell Biology, Emory University). Voltage steps were made from a holding potential ($E_h$) to various clamp potentials ($E_c$), followed by a step to a test potential ($E_t$). The currents flowing in response to these steps are named by the convention $I(E, t)$, where $I$ is the current flowing at time $t$ after the step to the potential $E$.

**Exponential Curve-Fitting**

For curve-fitting, data acquisition was begun between 10 and 50 ms after the voltage step. The tail currents illustrated were fitted to sums of exponentials by the Marquardt method of iterative least squares. Recently, however, these results have been verified using an algorithm developed by E. Yeramian (Institut Pasteur, Paris). The algorithm does not require any a priori hypothesis about the number of components and is based on the combined use of Laplace transforms and Padé approximants. The principle of the method is similar to that described by Isenberg and co-workers (see references in Isenberg and Small, 1982).

**RESULTS**

**Morphology of Dissociated Frog Atrial Cells**

Fig. 1A is a Nomarski micrograph of a single cell dissociated from a frog atrium. This cell is typical of the cells that were used for voltage-clamp experiments. The dimensions of 62 fixed cells in 10 randomly selected low-power micrographs were measured by tracing enlargements of images on a digitizing pad attached to a computer (Hartzell and Sale, 1985). Only single cells, identified by the
presence of a single nucleus, were measured. The mean length was 227 ± 112 μm (mean ± 95% confidence interval; range, 128–360 μm). The cells were somewhat tapered and their diameter varied along the length of the cell, as shown in the electron micrograph of Fig. 1B. Near the nucleus, the typical diameter was 5–6 μm, whereas at the ends of the cell, the diameter was closer to 2 μm. For electrophysiological experiments, we selected relaxed cells. We did not routinely measure the length of these cells, but the average length of 14 cells used for electrophysiology was 281 ± 76 μm. Assuming a specific capacitance of 1 μF/cm², one would expect a cylindrical cell 280 μm long and 5 μm in diameter to have a capacitance of 44 pF. The average measured capacitance of these 14 cells was 64 ± 37 pF. The difference between the expected and the observed
values is probably explained by the infoldings of the plasma membrane, which can be observed in the high-power electron micrograph of Fig. 1C.

The sarcomere length was 2.0–2.1 μm (Fig. 1B), which was identical to that measured in intact frog atrium (Hartzell, H. C., and W. S. Sale, unpublished data). The dissociated cells had large clear areas and very little identifiable sarcoplasmic reticulum, but we are uncertain whether this was due to artifacts induced by fixation or was due to the dissociation procedure. Atrial specific granules were prominent in the nuclear region.

**Time-dependent Outward Current**

Time-dependent outward currents were examined by the protocols shown in Fig. 2. In Fig. 2A, 11-s depolarizations to various potentials were made from $E_H = -50$ mV.

After an instantaneous decrease in current caused by the negative slope conductance of $I_K$, in this range of potentials (Simmons and Hartzell, 1985), an outward current slowly developed. The delayed outward current reached a steady state level with a time constant of several seconds and showed no signs of inactivation, even with clamp pulses as long as 20 s.

**Reversal Potential**

To determine the $K^+$ selectivity of this current, the reversal potential ($E_m$) was measured in 2, 4, 10, and 20 mM $[K^+]_o$ (Fig. 3A). The membrane was depolarized from $-50$ to $+50$ mV for 10 s to activate $I_K$ fully. The membrane was then stepped to various test potentials and the voltage at which the current tails reversed was measured. The reversal potential of the current tails was typically
5 mV positive to the calculated $E_K$. In Fig. 3B (squares), the reversal potential was plotted as a function of $[K^+]_o$. The slope of the resulting line was 57 mV/10-fold change in $[K^+]_o$, which was very close to the expected value of 59 mV if $I_K$ were specifically permeable to K$^+$.

![Figure 3](image)

**Figure 3.** Effects of extracellular K$^+$ on the reversal potential of $I_K$. (A) Sample of current tracings used to determine $E_{rev}$. Voltage is shown on the top and current is shown on the bottom. This record was obtained in 4 mM $[K^+]_o$. The membrane was stepped from $E_H = -50$ mV to $E_c = +50$ mV for 2 or 10 s and then clamped to $E_T = -60, -70, -80,$ or $-90$ mV. Note that the current tails reverse near $-80$ mV after either a 2- or 10-s pulse. The clamp potentials were shifted accordingly for the determination of $E_{rev}$ in different $[K^+]_o$. (B) Dependence of $E_{rev}$ on $[K^+]_o$. (Circles) Mean $E_{rev}$ after a 2-s pulse. (Squares) Mean $E_{rev}$ after a 10-s pulse. $n = 5$ cells. Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals for each point. The line is the least-squares fit to the data and exhibits a slope of 57 mV/10-fold change in $[K^+]_o$.

**K$^+$ Accumulation**

One would not expect K$^+$ accumulation to occur to the same extent in single, isolated cells as in multicellular preparations, where the extracellular space is much smaller. However, the electron micrograph of Fig. 1C demonstrates that there are numerous small caveolae of the plasma membrane in these cells. These
caveolae present a possible site of K⁺ accumulation. To determine whether accumulation or depletion of K⁺ was occurring during the long voltage steps that we used to characterize this current, $E_{rev}$ was compared after activation of the current for 2 or 10 s. If accumulation of K⁺ around the cell occurred during the pulse, one would expect the reversal potential to be shifted in a positive direction with progressively longer depolarizing pulses. The membrane was stepped to $-60, -70, -80$, or $-90$ mV after a 2- or 10-s step from $-50$ to $+50$ mV (Fig. 3A). The $E_{rev}$, obtained at 2 s (Fig. 3B, circles) was not statistically different from the $E_{rev}$ obtained at 10 s (Fig. 3B, squares).

**Basis for the Characterization of $I_K$**

We have found that $I_K$ is well described by a classical Hodgkin-Huxley scheme of the form: $I_K = n^pI_K$, where $n$ is the activation variable raised to the power $p$ and $I_K$ is the fully activated current (Hodgkin and Huxley, 1952). With this model, $I_K$ can be fully described according to its kinetics, activation range, and conductance with the protocols shown in Fig. 2.

**Sigmoid Onset of $I_K$**

The sigmoid time course of the activation of $I_K$ (Fig. 2A) indicated that $p > 1$. To determine the value of $p$, activating currents elicited by steps from $E_H = -80$ to $-40$ mV to $E_C$ from $-20$ to $+50$ mV (as shown in Fig. 2A) were fitted to:

$$I(t) = I(E_C, 10) \cdot [1 - \exp(-t/\tau_n)]^p.$$  

Fig. 4A shows the nonlinear least-squares fit to the activating current after a voltage step from $-50$ to $+20$ mV. For the dashed line, $p = 1$; for the solid line, $p = 2$; for the dotted line, $p = 3$. The best fit for the activating current was obtained with a single exponential with $p = 2$.

**Decay of Tail Currents**

We have fitted deactivating currents (tail currents) elicited by steps from $E_C = +50$ mV to $E_T$ from $+30$ to $-110$ mV to sums of exponentials of the form:

$$I(t) = I(E_T, 0) \cdot \exp(-t/\tau).$$

When $E_T$ was positive to $-30$ mV, the current tail was composed of two exponential components. When $E_T$ was hyperpolarized to $-30$ mV or more, the majority of the tails were fitted best by a single exponential. This finding could be explained either by assuming the presence of two conductances or by assuming that $p > 1$. According to the Hodgkin-Huxley model, after a step change in voltage, $n$ changes with time according to:

$$n(t) = n_0 + (n_0 - n_\infty) \exp(-t/\tau_n),$$

where $n_0$ is the initial value of $n$ and $n_\infty = n_\infty$ is the final value of $n$. Since the fits of the onset of the current indicated that $I_K$ is best described by $n^2$, and since at +50 mV the current is fully activated, i.e., $n_0 = 1$,

$$n^2(t) = n_\infty^2 + 2n_\infty (1 - n_\infty) \exp(-t/\tau_n) + (1 - n_\infty)^2 \exp(-2t/\tau_n)^2.$$
Thus, a current tail composed of two exponentials would be expected, unless $n_\infty = 0$, when the equation simplifies to $n^2(t) = \exp(-2t/\tau_n)$. Thus, when $n_0 = 1$ and $n_\infty = 0$, the current tail will be composed of a single-exponential component. Consequently, we have fitted deactivating tails elicited by steps from $E_C = +50$ mV to $E_T = -30$ to $-110$ mV to $I(t) = I(E_T, 0) \exp(-2t/\tau_n)$. Fig. 4B shows the

**Figure 4.** Mathematical fits of activating and deactivating $I_K$ currents. (A) Activating current in response to a voltage step from $E_H = -50$ mV to $E_C = +20$ mV. The current was fitted to an equation of the form $I(t) = I(E_C, 11) [1 - \exp(-t/\tau)]^p$ for $p = 1, 2, 3$. For the dashed line, $I(t) = 1.25 [1 - \exp(-t/1.54)]^3$; for the solid line, $I(t) = 1.29 [1 - \exp(-t/1.99)]^3$; for the dotted line, $I(t) = 1.42 [1 - \exp(-t/3.82)]^3$. (B) Deactivating current in response to a hyperpolarizing pulse from $E_C = +50$ mV to $E_T = -50$ mV. The line is fitted to the single exponential $I(t) = 0.68 [\exp(-t/1.6)]^2 - 0.02$. 
deactivating current for return to -50 from +50 mV. The single-exponential nature of the decay of the current tails is also shown in Fig. 5C, where deactivating current tails are plotted on semilogarithmic coordinates.

**Figure 5.** Envelope-of-tails test for $I_K$. (A) Activating current after an 11-s step from $E_H = -60$ mV to $E_C = +50$ mV with superimposed tails after the return to $E_T = -60$ mV at 0.8, 1.2, 1.6, 2, 2.4, 2.8, 3.2, 4, 5, 7, 9, or 11 s. No tails were observed after 0.1-, 0.2-, or 0.4-s steps. (B) Comparison of tail amplitudes with activating current. The left axis is the scale for the activating current trace, $I(E_C)$. The right axis is scaled for the tail amplitudes, $I(E_T, 0)$, obtained from A and plotted as circles. (C) Tails after 1.2-, 2-, and 4-s steps plotted on log scale. Points were digitized every 5 ms. The lines are single-exponential fits to the data. For the tail after the 1.2-s step, $I(t) = 0.16 \exp(-t/0.39)$; after the 2-s step, $I(t) = 0.26 \exp(-t/0.51)$; after the 3-s step, $I(t) = 0.34 \exp(-t/0.79)$.
Envelope of Tails

Two assumptions involved in our analysis of this current are that (a) the amplitude of the current tails is a quantitative measure of the size and time course of the current and (b) the current does not have a time-dependent component (Hodgkin and Huxley, 1952; Giles and Shibata, 1985). To test these assumptions, the time course of the "envelope of tails" was compared with the time course of $I_K$. $I_K$ was activated by a voltage step from $E_H = -60$ mV to $E_C = +50$ mV, followed by a step to $E_T = -60$ mV after 0.1, 0.2, 0.4, 0.8, 1.2, 1.6, 2, 2.4, 2.8, 3.2, 4, 5, 7, 9, or 11 s. Fig. 5A shows the activating current and the current tails after the last 12 steps. After depolarizations for 0.1, 0.2, or 0.4 s, no current tails were measurable. In Fig. 5B, the onset of the current, $I(E_C)$, is plotted and compared with the peak of the current tails, $I(E_T, 0)$. Note that the envelope in Fig. 5B also exhibits a sigmoidal shape and that the tail amplitudes accurately reflect the activation of $I_K$.

The decaying tails after 1.2-, 2-, and 4-s steps are plotted on a log scale in Fig. 5C. Note that the current decays as a single exponential independently of the amount of activating current. This further supports the assumption that the current being studied consists of a single component.

Kinetics

The time constants calculated from the mathematical fits of the activating and deactivating currents are plotted in Fig. 6. The time constant of the current was slowest, with a value of $\sim 5$ s near $-30$ mV, and declined to a minimum value of $<1$ s at very positive and negative membrane potentials. The time constants of activation and deactivation of $I_K$ in Mn Ringer (circles), Cd Ringer (triangles), and in Mn Ringer containing 250 μM Ba$^{2+}$ (squares) were statistically indistinguishable.
Steady State Activation

The protocol shown in Fig. 2A was used to examine the steady state activation. Depolarizations were made to different $E_C$ values from $E_H = -50$ mV. The current was allowed to plateau and the membrane was then repolarized to a constant $E_T$ of $-50$ mV. The amplitudes of the decaying tail currents, $I(ET, 0)$, upon repolarization were measured and plotted against $E_C$. The activation curves were normalized with respect to the calculated maximum tail current, $I_{max}(ET, 0)$, for that cell to obtain values of $n_a^2$. Fig. 7 illustrates the mean normalized values of $n_a^2$ for cells in Mn Ringer (circles), Mn Ringer containing 250 μM Ba$^{2+}$ (squares), and Cd Ringer (triangles). This current did not activate at potentials negative to $-50$ mV and was almost fully activated at +20 mV. Neither Ba$^{2+}$ nor Cd$^{2+}$ had an effect on the activation of $I_K$.

Figure 7. Steady state activation curve for $I_K$. The degree of activation, $n_a^2$, was determined from the protocol of Fig. 2A and normalized to the maximum current for each cell, $I_{max}(ET, 0)$. (Circles) Mn Ringer. (Squares) 250 μM Ba$^{2+}$. (Triangles) Cd Ringer. The lines show the least-squares fits for the data obtained in Mn Ringer, $n_a = 1/[1 + \exp((-14 - E_m)/12)]$, and for the data obtained in Mn Ringer plus 250 μM Ba$^{2+}$, $n_a = 1/[1 + \exp((-7 - E_m)/13)]$. Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals for each point. $n = 5$ cells.

Figure 8. Fully activated current-voltage relation for $I_K$ obtained by a combination of methods as described in the text. (Circles) Control. (Squares) 250 μM Ba$^{2+}$. (Triangles) 100 μM Cd$^{2+}$. Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. $n = 5$ cells.
Voltage Dependence

The fully activated current-voltage relationship for \( I_K \) is shown in Fig. 8. Each point represents the average of five cells. Three types of measurement were used to determine the ion transfer function. (a) We used the rectifier-ratio method (Noble and Tsien, 1968). Cells were depolarized from \( E_H = -50 \) mV to different \( E_C \) values between -10 and +50 mV for 11 s, followed by repolarization to \( E_T = -50 \) mV, as shown in Fig. 2A. \( I(E) \) was calculated from the equation

\[
I(E) = \frac{\left[ I(E_C, 10) - I(E_C, 0) \right]}{\left[ I(E_T, 0) - I(E_T, 10) \right]} I_{\text{max}}(E_T, 0),
\]

and plotted vs. \( E_C \). (b) \( I(E) \) was calculated from the tail currents elicited by repolarizing the membrane to different \( E_T \) values from -110 to +10 mV after first fully activating \( I_K \) with a conditioning pulse to +50 mV, as shown in Fig. 2B. \( I(E) \) was calculated from the equation

\[
I(E) = \frac{I(E_T, 0) - I(E_T, 10)}{dn_2^2},
\]

where \( dn_2^2 \) is the difference in activation, \( n_2^* \), between \( E_C \) and \( E_T \). \( I(E) \) was then plotted vs. \( E_T \). (c) \( I(E) \) was measured directly from the initial amplitudes of the tail currents \( [I(E_T, 0)] \) elicited by hyperpolarizing steps from +50 mV to different \( E_T \) values between 0 and -80 mV, as shown in Fig. 2B. In the voltage ranges where these three methods overlapped, the different methods gave the same results. The ion transfer function was linear from -110 to +50 mV. There was no significant effect of \( \text{Ba}^{2+} \) or \( \text{Cd}^{2+} \) on the fully activated \( I-V \) relationship (Fig. 8).

DISCUSSION

In these studies, we have characterized the time- and voltage-dependent outward current, \( I_K \), in single cells from frog atrium. Our data show that this current is carried selectively by K ions, behaves as an ohmic conductance in the range of -110 to +50 mV, and can be described by a single Hodgkin-Huxley conductance with a squared activation variable. These studies confirm and extend the original observations on \( I_K \) in isolated frog atrial cells by Hume and Giles (1983). Our results and those of Hume and Giles (1983) differ significantly from some previous studies of \( I_K \), both in amphibian and mammalian tissues.

Number of Components

Brown and collaborators (1976a–c, 1977, 1980) have suggested that the delayed outward current is best explained by two membrane conductances, one slow, \( I_{k,\text{slow}} \), and one fast, \( I_{k,\text{fast}} \). In addition, Brown et al. (1980) describe a third component that results from \( K^+ \) accumulation in the extracellular clefts. Ojeda and Rougier (1974) also observed a fast and a slow component, although some preparations exhibited only a single component. DeHemptinne (1971), on the other hand, described only a single component of delayed rectification.

Our data suggest that \( I_K \) is composed of only a single conductance because, when the power of the activation variable is taken into account, the activation and inactivation kinetics of \( I_K \) are consistently described by single-exponential functions. This description of \( I_K \) as a single current is in agreement with studies
on $I_K$ in single cells from frog sinus venosus (Giles and Shibata, 1985) and atrium (Hume and Giles, 1983). The differences between these recent studies and previous ones are most easily explained by the differences between single cells and multicellular preparations. The technical problems associated with voltage-clamping multicellular preparations are well documented (Johnson and Lieberman, 1971; New and Trautwein, 1972; Attwell and Cohen, 1977). In addition, it is known that extracellular $K^+$ accumulation occurs during the long voltage-clamp pulses used to study $I_K$ (Maughan, 1973; Brown et al., 1976c, 1977, 1980; S. J. Noble, 1976; Attwell and Cohen, 1977; Kline and Morad, 1978; Attwell et al., 1979; Morad, 1980; Lammel, 1981; Cohen and Kline, 1982). One of the currents identified in the sucrose-gap voltage-clamp studies closely resembles the $I_K$ described here. The other currents in the sucrose gap experiments are probably related to $K^+$ accumulation, even though theoretical arguments (Brown et al., 1980) have suggested that these currents were not due to $K^+$ accumulation.

$K^+$ accumulation does not seem to occur to any significant extent in these isolated cells, as first shown by Hume and Giles (1983). The reversal potential of $I_K$ does not shift after long depolarizing pulses, and the resting membrane potential is the same immediately before and after a long voltage-clamp pulse (Hartzell, H. C., unpublished data).

In other cardiac cell types, however, $I_K$ may actually be composed of two conductances. Studies in mammalian heart tissues have commonly identified two conductances (see Carmeliet and Vereecke, 1979, for review). For example, in Purkinje fibers (Noble and Tsien, 1969a), in small aggregates of chicken atrial cells (Shrier, A., and J. R. Clay, personal communication), and in single cells isolated from rabbit nodal tissue (Irisawa, 1984), $I_K$ appears to be composed of two conductances. Recently, however, Gintant et al. (1985) have suggested that $I_K$ in Purkinje fibers decays as a sum of two exponentials because $I_K$ is composed of one conductance with at least two closed states.

**Kinetics of $I_K$**

We consistently observed that $I_K$ exhibited a sigmoid onset. This sigmoid onset was present regardless of the holding potential before the pulse, which suggests that the sigmoid onset was not due to other contaminating time- or voltage-dependent inward currents. The sigmoid onset of $I_K$ might suggest that this current was a $Ca^{2+}$-activated $K^+$ conductance. However, this current is not affected by $Ca^{2+}$ antagonists such as $Cd^{2+}$ or $Mn^{2+}$. Furthermore, the current was present even though the cells were perfused with 1 mM EGTA.

**Comparison of $I_K$ in Atrial and Primary Pacemaker Cells**

Recently, Giles and Shibata (1985) have published an analysis of $I_K$ in primary pacemaker cells of the frog sinus venosus. There are several important differences between our results and techniques and those of Giles and Shibata (1985). In our experiments, the slow inward $Ca^{2+}$ current was inhibited with $Mn^{2+}$ or $Cd^{2+}$ and our intracellular medium contained a solution with 125 mM $K^+$, compared with 1 M $K^+$ in the experiments of Giles and Shibata (1985). Table 1 compares several features of $I_K$ in the two cell types. The most notable difference
is in the activation curve. In the atrial cells, the threshold for activation of $I_K$ appears to be $\sim 15$ mV positive to the threshold in sinus cells. In addition, the fully activated $I-V$ in the sinus cells inwardly rectifies above $-30$ mV, whereas in atrial cells the $I-V$ curve is linear at least to $+40$ mV. It is not clear whether these differences are related to technique or whether they have physiological importance. However, it is notable that the threshold for activation of $I_{Ca}$ in atrial cells is also $10-15$ mV positive (Fischmeister, R., and H. C. Hartzell, unpublished data) to that reported for sinus cells (Shibata and Giles, 1985).

**Function of $I_K$**

The activation range and the kinetics of $I_K$ have suggested that this current is responsible for initiating repolarization during phase 2 of repolarization (see Carmeliet, 1977). By clarifying the kinetics and activation of this current in frog atrial cells, our data provide further support for this role (Figs. 6–8). These data show that $I_K$ is activated only at potentials positive to $-30$ mV. Above $+20$ mV, $I_K$ is completely activated, with a time constant of $\sim 1-1.5$ s. At room temperature, the frog heart beats at a frequency between 0.5 and 1/s and the action potential remains positive to $+20$ mV for $\sim 400$ ms. Thus, during an action potential, $5-10\%$ of $I_K$ will be activated. Since the maximum $I_K$ is $1-3$ nA, $50-300$ pA of current will be activated during an action potential. With a cell of $60$ pF capacitance, $100$ pA of current is capable of repolarizing the membrane at a rate of $\sim 2$ V/s, which is sufficient to account for the initiation of repolarization. As the membrane repolarizes, $I_K$ will deactivate, with a time constant of decay decreasing from $1.5$ s at $-40$ mV to $400$ ms at $-80$ mV. Thus, a considerable amount of $I_K$ (several tens of picoamperes) will remain activated at the time the maximum diastolic potential is reached. As $I_K$ decays during the interbeat interval, it could play a significant role in regulating the frequency of beating and the duration of the refractory period (Carmeliet, 1977).

Recently, Giles and Shibata (1985) and Shibata and Giles (1985) have shown that $I_K$ plays a similar role in repolarization in the pacemaker cell. In addition,
because of the slow kinetics of deactivation of \( I_K \), the deactivation of \( I_K \) plays an important role in determining the slope of the pacemaker depolarization. The working atrial cell, in contrast to the pacemaker cell, does not normally beat spontaneously. This is partly because the atrial cell has a large background K\(^+\) conductance \( (I_{K1}) \) (Shibata and Giles, 1985; Simmons and Hartzell, 1985), which is usually >200 S/F at potentials below -60 mV. \( I_{K1} \) keeps the membrane hyperpolarized and prevents spontaneous firing. Indeed, Giles and Shibata (1985) have shown that atrial cells will pace spontaneously if the background \( I_{K1} \) current is blocked with Ba\(^{2+}\). We have shown here that Ba\(^{2+}\) does not significantly affect the kinetics, the activation, or the conductance of \( I_K \). Thus, the results of Giles and Shibata (1985) strongly support the idea that \( I_K \) plays a role in determining the rate of the pacemaker depolarization in pacemaker cells.

**Sensitivity to Ba\(^{2+}\)**

We have previously found that Ba\(^{2+}\) blocks the background, inwardly rectifying K\(^+\) current, \( I_{K1} \), at a lower concentration than it blocks the acetylcholine-activated K\(^+\) current, \( I_{K(ACh)} \) (Simmons and Hartzell, 1985, and unpublished data). Both \( I_{K(ACh)} \) and \( I_{K1} \), however, are completely blocked by 250 \( \mu \)M Ba\(^{2+}\). To examine further the specificity of Ba\(^{2+}\) effects on K\(^+\) currents, we tested 250 \( \mu \)M Ba\(^{2+}\) on \( I_K \). At this concentration, Ba\(^{2+}\) had no significant effect on the activation, time constants, or current-voltage relation of \( I_K \). Consequently, it is possible for one to study the delayed K\(^+\) current separately without interference from \( I_{K1} \) or \( I_{K(ACh)} \). Ba\(^{2+}\) at higher concentrations (>1 mM) does block the time-dependent K\(^+\) conductances in the rabbit sinoatrial node (Osterrieder et al., 1982).

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